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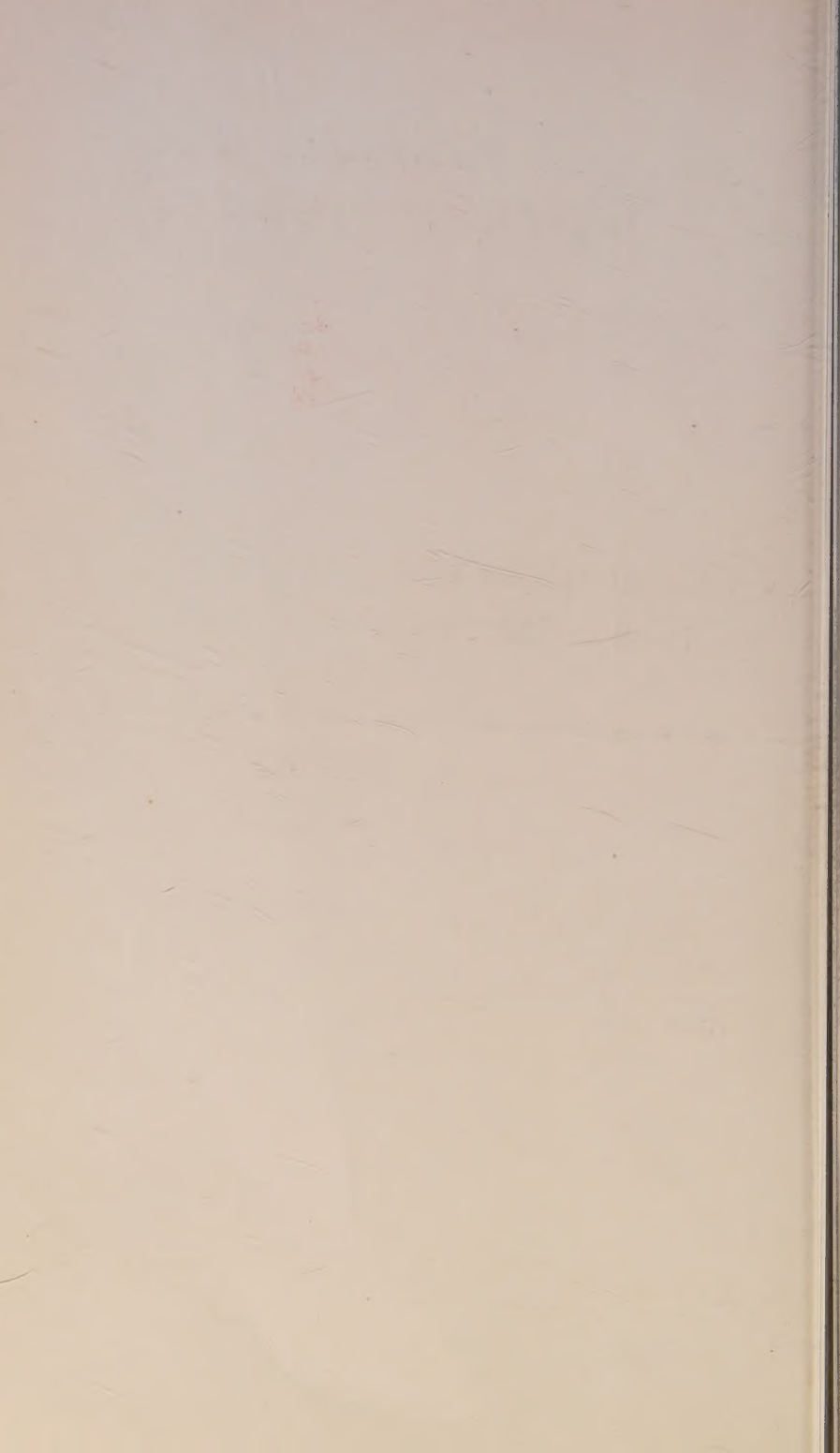
BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON DALIT CHRISTIANS

Edited by

George Soares-Prabhu

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Biblical Reflections on Dalit Christians

Edited by

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Editorial

It is not coincidental that this issue of *Jeevadhara* on Biblical Reflections on Christian Dalits, should have appeared soon after the meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India in Pune in January 1992, and not too long after the National Convention of Catholics, meeting in Bombay in June 1989. Both these meetings expressed concern about the situation of the Dalits in the country and in the Church. The CBCI announced as its deepest concerns "the uplift of the Dalits, providing a voice to unorganized labour and granting women their due status" (*Examiner* 25.1.1992:1); the delegates of the National Convention decided to "commit themselves to conscientize the Catholic Community about the sin of caste practice and discrimination that is widespread among Christians", and to "declare the 1990's as the Decade of the Dalit Christians" (*Report*, 1989: 39). Because of the growing strength of dalit movements in the country, and more recently in the Catholic Church, the dalit problem (more correctly the problem of the perverse attitude of the caste Indians who oppress them) has exploded into our awareness. We have become conscious of the fact that our vaunted 'age old civilization', and our 'holy' Catholic Church nurture one of the most evil and oppressive systems in history.

The oppression of the Dalit is unique. In it, the massive economic exploitation that devastates Latin America, meets the cultural and racist oppression which has so deeply scarred the soul of sub-Saharan Africa. The Dalit thus stands as a microcosm of Third World oppression: systematically robbed of the material goods that are his or her due, and (worse) systematically denied the dignity that is his or her right. The physical and psychic violence to which Dalits are daily exposed in our country and in our Church is frightening.

Only apartheid, I believe, can rival caste for its systematic degradation of millions of people. But apartheid is neither as

widespread, nor as inventive in its cruelties as caste has proved to be. Blacks in South Africa are not made to eat human excreta, as happens with us; and children are not burned to death in black townships for stealing a pair of sandals, as they sometimes are in Indian villages. Nor is apartheid (now beginning to disappear) as tenacious as caste, which has held on for a thousand years, and shows no signs of letting go. It is a measure of our insensibility that we have taken so long to wake up to what is happening around us.

But the dalit situation has now burst into awareness, and a dalit theology has begun to emerge in response to it. Because the dalits in India are a Third World in the Third World, reproducing almost all the varied forms of Third World oppression, a dalit theology will make a significant contribution to the theology of the Third World. It will be able to contribute to, and learn from, both the liberation theology of the Latin American poor, the Womanist theology of Third World women, and the Black theology of the South African and the United States' Blacks. Dalit theology thus holds great potential. It will become, I believe, along with tribal theology, the specific form that Christian theology in India will assume in the days to come. For a truly Christian theology must always be a theology of the Crucified who is Risen, and in India today it is the dalit who is the Crucified.

This issue of *Jeevadharma* attempts a very elementary biblical contribution to such a dalit theology. A proper hermeneutics of the Bible must begin, I have argued elsewhere, from the situation in which the text is read and not from the text itself. Otherwise the hermeneutical circle between reader and text will not be complete, and the reading (whether historical or literary) will remain text-bound, yielding more and more unproductive information about the text, without ever saying anything to the situation of the reader.

We begin our issue, therefore, with an actual case study, the description of the situation of the Christian dalits in Tamilnadu, by a sociologist, Dr. Antony Raj, S. J. Antony Raj is himself a dalit who has been actively involved in the struggle of Christian dalits for a place in the sun. His article shows a sensibility to the problem

that is missing in outside and official statements, and carries the weight of his own first hand experience. This opening article is followed by three others which describe biblical responses to the situation Antony Raj has presented. Dr. George Koonthanam, MCBS shows how Yhwh is depicted by the great prophets of Israel (exemplified by Isaiah) as the defender of the 'dalits'; Dr. A. Mariaselvam offers a fine analysis of Psalm 140 as an expression of the cry of the Dalit; and Dr. George Soares-Prabhu shows what the table fellowship of Jesus with tax collectors and sinners (an important element in the gospel story of Jesus) could mean for the situation of the dalit Christians in India today.

These articles are, as we have suggested, first probes. They will hopefully further the attempt already underway to read the Bible for what it is, a 'dalit' book. Written for an oppressed people, the Bible is truly part of a dalit literature, with an unmistakable message for both the victims of oppression, and for all those who, like us, have actively or by default contributed to their distress.

George Soares-Prabhu

The Dalit Christian Reality in Tamilnadu

When I think of the Catholic Church in Tamilnadu, I am reminded of Shakespeare's famous saying, "There is something rotten in the state of Denmark". The Catholic Church in Tamilnadu is a highly caste conscious organization. Like any other organization in our caste-ridden society, the Church too is organized around caste structures, identities and interests. Caste is ubiquitous in all the structures of social relationship in the Church. It is the central part of the language of social intercourse. Power, authority and patronage, all flow from the caste pipe line. The non-dalits who are a minority in the Church (30 percent), create a system of social closure by means of which they monopolize all the positions of power and privilege in the Church, and restrict access to resources and opportunities to the majority, the dalit Catholics, who form 70 percent of the total Catholic population in Tamilnadu. The social closure entails the singling out of certain social traits as the justificatory basis of exclusion. Untouchability and the prejudices that go with it, become such a justificatory basis for the social exclusion of the dalits in the Catholic Church. Social exclusion as a downward exercise of power, is bound to be challenged by the use of power in an upward direction by the dalits. This is known as usurpation. To put it differently, social exclusion and usurpation are sociological jargon for a power struggle that is going on in the Catholic Church in Tamilnadu. The purpose of this article is to expose this struggle.

I write this article as a dalit participant in this struggle. Hence the use of the first person. Besides affirming my dalit identity, this makes it clear that the article does not pretend to any academic 'objectivity'. Indeed I am not a believer in a supposedly value free approach to social reality. I write this consciously from the perspective of the victims. It may be time for

those who are accustomed to looking at things from above to hear this side of the story too.

The dalit Christian reality in India resembles closely the situation of the man in Tolstoy's parable, which runs:

I sit on a man's back, choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for him and wish to lighten his load by all possible means – except by getting off his back.

From this parable I would like to begin by raising three questions and trying to answer them: 1) Who is this man carrying a burden on his back? 2) Who is sitting on his back? 3) What is the burden he carries, and what is he to do about it?

The man carrying the burden

The man carrying the burden on his back is the dalit, a word which means literally one who is broken or oppressed. The non-dalits prefer to call us avarnas, antyajas, panchamas, exterior castes, outcastes, depressed classes, scheduled castes, harijans and untouchables. But these names carry within them the virus of a binary opposition of the 'we-the-pure' and 'you-the-impure'. Against these names which attribute hereditary impurity to us, we choose to give a name to ourselves and that name is 'dalit'. The word dalit indicates a number of things. First, it clearly identifies our oppressors. If today we are reduced to a life of abject poverty and treated as polluted human beings, it is the non-dalits that are the cause of our dehumanization. No non-dalit can absolve himself from this collective guilt. Second, the word connotes the consciousness of our own unfree existence and outcast experience, which form the basis for a new cultural unity and dalit ideology. The core of such an ideology is freedom and humanism. We want to be human, and to be human is to be free. Third, it also indicates a certain militancy. The name dalit is a symbol of change, confrontation and revolution.

In brief, the word 'dalit' stands for the oppressed, ex-untouchables of India who are in search of a cultural identity. The affirmation of dalitness is a source of confrontation. Militancy is integral to our understanding of dalitness.

Who is sitting on our backs

The one sitting on our backs is not an impersonal value-system, nor an outdated ideology, but the non-dalit. The very

presence of a non-dalit is a reminder to us of the tyranny of the caste system and heinous practice of untouchability. For the non-dalits, the caste system may be a *chef-d'oeuvre*, the happiest achievement of Hindu civilization, because it has thrust greatness on them without their meriting it, but for us it is an abomination and a cancer. To foist this abomination on us the non-dalits have been using religious ideology such as purity/pollution and theological tenets such as *karma*, *dharma*, and *samskara*. Through such religious ideology they have been exercising over us a primitive form of barbarism and have reduced us to mere slaves, filling our days with misery and distress and flooding our nights with anguish and tears.

What is the burden we carry?

The burden we carry on our backs is three thousand years of segregation and discrimination. The burden is an immensely heavy one. We have been denied even a dignified name in society. We have been denied access to public facilities, such as wells, schools, roads, post-offices and courts. We are not permitted to enter into a temple, lest our presence pollute the holy gods and goddesses it holds. We have been segregated and forced to live on the outskirts of villages. We have been denied the services of the serving castes. Non-dalits have prescribed what we should and should not wear. They have even restricted our movements. We are not allowed on the roads and streets within a prescribed distance of persons of higher castes. We have been prescribed certain forms of deference in address, language, sitting and standing in their presence. If we fail to take these prescriptions seriously, we are beaten up, lynched, or done away with. The recent incident at Tsundur, Andhra Pradesh speaks for itself.

Economically, we have been excluded from any honourable and from most of the profitable forms of employment. We were forbidden to own land. Even if a dalit could *de jure* own land, *de facto* the mirasidars have made every effort to prevent this, in order to make sure of a continuous and permanent supply of cheap labour. Treemenheere (1891:6) writes:

That a pariah can in fact obtain waste land as freely as other classes.. is incorrect. He may apply for it, but he has to run the gauntlet of first the Mirasidars, and secondly of the non-Mirasi Pattadars, both of which classes abhor the thought

of his acquiring land, and one of which cannot get enough for itself.

When some well-to-do dalits returning from Natal or from the salt factories desired to buy land for cultivation, all forms of chicanery set in, and the dalits were not able to get any land. Pandian (1899:44) provides an interesting case study. The village accountant (Karnam) made a dalit believe that the government waste land could be monopolized without the consent of the government. Through hard work the poor Dalit brought the land under cultivation. Once the land was brought under plough, the Karnam asked the Dalit to apply for a patta (a title-deed to the land). When he applied for the land, the Karnam was the first one to oppose it and misappropriate the land from him. This shows how landlessness is an attribute of the dalits. Ownership of land means pride, and the non-dalits will not tolerate any pride in the dalits. Economically we are a people without land, or any other form of assets.

While education has been the privilege of every Brahmin, the dalits were not even allowed to listen to the Vedas. If one recited vedic texts his tongue would be cut off; and if he memorized them his body would be split into two. One might surmise that the British education would democratize education, but the non-dalits barred the Dalits from educational institutions for economic reasons. The Bombay Provincial Committee reported that if the low castes were to get an education, then no one would do the coarse and low work of society. In 1888, out of 11,490 students studying in Chegalpattu district, Tamilnadu, only 1443 were Dalits. There were many reasons for it. The Mirasdars and other masters of the Dalits set their face against their education. The parents of the non-dalit children objected to their children sitting along with the dalit children in the school. School masters shared the same prejudice and made them sit outside the school and taught them at a distance. Even if they looked for dalit teachers, they could find none. This exclusion from education was an effective way of tying the dalits to the soil. Education means status and power, and the non-dalits were not willing to give it to the Dalits.

The socio-economic discrimination and deprivation of cultural capital have done a great psychic damage to us dalits. We are skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, servility, subservience, hopelessness, despair and abasement. This means

slavery and social death. When we are forced to live under a truculent nightmare in slums and cherris, and our daily experience tells us that almost nowhere in society are we respected and wanted, nowhere granted the ordinary dignity, deference and courtesy accorded to other human beings, we begin to doubt our own inner worth and dignity. Since we are forced to hinge our hopes on our oppressors for clues as to how we should view and value ourselves, and our children who are consistently rejected in the school and in church, we understandably begin to question and doubt whether we, our families, and our groups really merit no more respect from the non-dalits than what we receive today. These nagging doubts and a deep sense of being no-people and having no-place have sown the seeds of a pernicious self — and group-hatred and self-pity. "This is very noticeable among the poor — God puts self-pity by the side of despair like the cure by the side of the disease" (Camus). The worst crime the caste man has committed against us has been to teach us to hate and pity ourselves. It pains us very much to talk of these psychological traits of our social character, but we have to face them in order to free ourselves from their hegemony. These negative feelings, I would like to emphasize, are the creation of the non-dalits; and they can see in the mirror of our misery their own cruel faces.

Conversion — a radical alternate

From this social closure the exclusion of Dalits from status, resources, opportunities and power has been made permanent. There has been upward mobility among the middle caste groups through education, sanskritization and westernization but never among the Dalits. They have to look for a new radical cultural alternative other than the caste system and Hinduism. Ambedkar (1989: 412-413) writes,

Which Untouchable is there with soul so dead as to give such an admission by adhering to Hinduism. That Hinduism is inconsistent with the self-respect and honour of the Untouchables is the strongest ground which justifies the conversion of the Untouchables to another and nobler faith...

Christianity provides one such alternative. Such search for a new social order becomes a moral imperative for our freedom. This is the context of our conversion to Christianity. I am not saying that search for freedom and equality is the only motive for our

conversion. In any mass conversion the motives have been mixed. It was not just the love of God that brought the Paravas of the Coramandal Coast to Christianity; it was also the fear of the Muslims and the assurance of protection by the Portuguese. Now the question is how far our thirst for equality was quenched within the Catholic Church.

Discrimination within the catholic church

Without going into our hoary past I shall provide a synchronic view of dalit Christian reality. We, the dalit converts to Christianity today remain twice discriminated against – discriminated against by the State and by the Church. The State by the Presidential Order of 1950 has excluded us from protective discrimination on the assumption there cannot be any caste and caste-based inequality within the Christian Churches. In a recent case Soosai vs the Union of India and others the learned judges of the supreme court contend:

It was a declaration enjoined by clause(1) of Article 341 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 discriminates against Christian members of the enumerated castes it must be shown that they suffer from a comparable depth of social and economic disabilities and cultural and educational backwardness and similar levels of degradation within the Christian community necessitates intervention by the State under the provisions of the Constitution. It is not sufficient to show that the same caste continues after conversion. It is necessary to establish further that the disabilities and handicaps suffered from such caste membership in the social order of its origin – Hinduism – continue in their oppressive severity in the new environment of a different religious community.

The State makes it abundantly clear that in its view there cannot be any practice of untouchability within the Christian Churches, and hence it denies dalit Christians the privileges of protective discriminations. But we know too well that the moral ideal is very different from actual practice. Our bishops themselves admit such practices within the Catholic Church.

As caste distinctions are against Christian faith and human dignity, we join you in condemning strongly all caste distinctions... We have failed to live with this high sense of

equality and brotherliness which are basic to our faith. Caste distinctions and their resultant injustice and violence do still continue in Christian social life and practice. We are aware of and accept the situation with deep pain.

This statement of the bishops is proof enough for the practice of untouchability within the catholic church. The church, ruled by a minority of non-dalits, keeps the majority of dalit christians at the periphery. This goes against the democratic norms of any decent society. But the nature and magnitude of existing discrimination against dalit christians in Tamil Nadu is not yet sufficiently exposed.

Even today, in a predominantly christian village, the dalit colony is distinct and separate from the upper caste settlement. There are separate church buildings, hearses and cemeteries. The church in the village is cruciform, as in most parts of Tamilnadu, and the dalit christians are required to confine themselves to the wings of the house of God. In some parishes, they are not allowed to assist the priest during the eucharistic celebration or read scriptural passages. They are denied participation in the church choir. In administering sacraments such as baptism, confirmation and marriage, the dalits have to receive them only after the upper caste christians had been administered. Unashamedly, these practices still continue in the Catholic Church in Tamilnadu.

The poverty of the dalit christian is unfathomable. In a study on the social discrimination against the Dalit christians in Tamilnadu undertaken by the Jesuits of Madurai Province, it was shown that nearly 79.6 percent of the Dalit christians are landless. The daily wage for a landless labourer ranges from Rs 5 to Rs 15, depending on the season. The average income is Rs 903 which is much lower than the State average (Rs 2533). Fifty four percent live under mere thatched roofs. In the rainy season the houses get flooded, and no one can sleep for the night. Sixty seven percent of dalit households are not electrified. The illiteracy rate is as high as 65 percent. Nearly 35 percent of households manage with one set of clothes. Most of the households (85%) buy clothes only once in a year. Twenty five percent of the households do not go to a doctor because they do not have the means; and 30 percent go to the government hospitals which are known for their proverbial negligence. In such indigent existence

the probable way out from their poverty is accommodation. Galbraith says, "Given the formidable hold of the equilibrium of poverty within which they live, accommodation is the optimal solution".

The Dalit Christians are denied power in the Catholic Church. It is best evidenced by the fact that though Dalits constitute 70 percent of the total Catholic population in Tamilnadu, only one out of the 14 Catholic bishops in the State is a Dalit. No Dalit priest has been appointed vicar general, procurator, director of social works, director of schools and pastoral centres, rector of minor seminaries or to any other position of authority in the dioceses. No Dalit is admitted to the diocesan college of consultants, the core group assisting the bishop in the administration of the diocese. It is disheartening to know that there are only 3.8 percent of priests from the Dalit community. There is only one Dalit girl in the Presentation convent. There are just two priests each in Madurai, Palayamkottai and Sivagankai dioceses. So far, no serious attempt has been made by the dioceses or religious congregations to recruit Dalit boys and girls to the seminary or to religious life. We do understand that vocation is from God, but it boggles our mind why He should choose His priests from the non-Dalits only. Are we not justified in asking the following question: Is God too casteist? Does He also practice untouchability?

In the name of minority rights the Catholic Church has started many schools and colleges, but the Dalits who are the majority among the minority are denied admissions and appointments in these educational institutions. Dalit boys and girls coming from government schools, who just manage to get through school finals, are given non-utility courses in our colleges. Out of forty three vacancies in Palayamkottai diocesan schools in June 1991, only three were filled with Dalit teachers. The record of the Jesuits is not encouraging either. Out of eighteen vacancies in their schools, they appointed only one Dalit Catholic teacher in 1991. In some of the Jesuit schools, there is not even a single Dalit teacher. This non-performance makes their preferential option for the Dalits a mockery.

Such discrimination shows that there is a Dalit Christian problem. As long as the Christian social order shares the social bases, ethos and world-view with the Hindu social order, there

is bound to be discrimination in the christian churches. Unless the church authorities contemplate some drastic structural changes the old social order with its social closure will continue to exist which means continued social discrimination. I am afraid there is no serious attempt on the part of the church authorities towards any structural change.

Remedies and resistance

Since the bishops are aware of and accept the dalit reality with pain, the General Meeting of CBCI, Shillong 1989 has suggested the following action programmes.

The deplorable condition of Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin has always been one of our pre-occupations... So far political and legal efforts by the Church have borne no fruit. While continuing these efforts, we should explore other avenues for eradicating this injustice. An inner conversion on the part of all, specially of Bishops, priests and religious is called for. This will lead us to abolish every form of discrimination based on caste in the Church. For this diocesan commissions may be found useful. In the years to come the social service programmes of the dioceses should take up as a priority the socio-economic uplift of the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin. Our educational institutions should adopt a policy of preference in admissions and appointments of Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin till they reach a certain stage of equality with others. Promotion of vocations among them is another area where there must be a special thrust in the coming years. These measures, though they cover a lot of ground, point to certain conversion of the heart, and allocate certain concessions and charities to the dalits, will not alter the existing social relationship. But, unfortunately, the implementation of even these charities meets with lots of resistance mainly from priests and nuns.

On 26 October 1990, nearly 1500 Dalit Catholics, mostly women, from Palayamkottai diocese demonstrated before their bishop and priests demanding their rights. The bishop agreed to their demands and the agreement was signed by the bishop and the president of DCLM of Palayamkottai unit. The very next week non-dalit priests organized and brought their castes to the bishop's house. Their only demand was that the bishop should not implement his agreement with the dalit leaders. The bishop also agreed

to it. This has been the pattern elsewhere. When the Tamilnadu Bishops' Conference announced a ten point programme in January 1990 for the development of the dalit Catholics, most of the priests refused to read them in their churches. There are reasons for such resistance.

First, there is a lack of understanding of our dalitness. It is not merely a socio-economic problem which can be solved through social legislation and economic programmes, but it is a search for human dignity and justice. At the level of consciousness, we feel we are not a person but a thing. This sense of no-person and being not-wanted is a very serious problem. Mother Theresa constantly repeats that a greater sin than poverty is a sense of being not wanted. The church authorities do not seem to understand such painful undercurrents which are strongly embedded in every dalit consciousness. We do not expect such understanding from non-dalit bishops, priests, and nuns who have compromised human dignity to power and privileges.

Secondly, the church by projecting the socio-economic nature of the problem has been hiding the moral nature of the dalit reality. When the correspondent for *Illustrated Weekly of India* asked me to comment on the dalit problem I put all the emphasis on the moral aspect of the problem. I told him, "They (Brahmins) divide men into pure and impure, subordinate the impure to the pure and reduce them to a mere scum of our society. If this is not immoral, my christian sensibilities do not permit me to call adultery as sinful or immoral". (*The Illustrated Weekly of India*, June 25, 1989). This moral aspect of the problem is missing in the pastoral letters of our bishops (CBCI 1970, CBCI Standing Committee Report 1987, The Joint Pastoral Letter of TNBC, 1988, General Meeting of CBCI, 1989, The Joint Pastoral Letter of TNBC, 1990).

Thirdly, the church authorities through their pastoral letters and other declarations, have shown certain theological concern for the dalits, but such concern is not seen in action. How can we justify such theological concern with the existing practices of discrimination against the dalits? If our deplorable condition has been the preoccupation of our bishops (General Meeting of CBCI, 1989), have they taken any concrete action to eradicate the practice of untouchability in their dioceses. The contrary is true. When

two priests broke the barriers of the cemetery in Tiruchirapally, the bishops not only took disciplinary action against those priests, but also gave money to the Vellalas to rebuild the walls dividing the dalits from non-dalits. The CBCI's faith in the multi-purpose society and the diocesan SC/ST commission mostly headed by the non-dalit priests is misplaced. Most of them work against the dalit cause. Such a gap between theory and praxis may be due to lack of mediating structures or lack of new organizations that would implement those policies. But I feel that the church authorities have all the necessary power and infrastructures to translate their theological concern into action, but they lack the will to act. This may be due to the fact that though the dalits enjoy numerical preponderance over others, they are not adequately represented in the church administration, i.e., sharing of power and responsibility. Church authorities should realize that verbal radicalism and vacuous rhetoric are no substitutes for an authentic liberation.

Fourthly, there is certain indifference on the part of Church personnel to the problem of the dalits which is clearly seen in their letters and attitudes. While a priest was saying mass, three catholics were raping a dalit girl in the presbytery. Would our bishops, priests and nuns be indifferent if their sisters were to be gang-raped? Can we be indifferent when the landless labourers are axed to death? Can we afford to be indifferent when the dominant castes take on the dalits as an easy target to settle their small grievances? Can we be indifferent to divisions within the Christian churches, separate seating arrangements, separate burial grounds, separate communion rails and other types of discriminations in our churches? Krishna Iyer, one of our eminent jurists, says, "The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them. This is the essence of inhumanity".

Fifthly, I would like to differentiate between the public script and the hidden script. When the bishops say, "We state categorically that caste, with its consequent effects of discrimination and "caste mentality" has no place in Christianity" (Catholic Bishops's Conference of India, 1982, pp. 45-46), it is their public script. The hidden script, which directs their feeling, thinking and action is very different from their public script. When a bishop compares the dalits to barking dogs, this reveals his hidden script. Elsewhere the same bishop has said that the church authorities are not

compelling the dalits to stay in the church, if they want they can quit it at any time. A parish priest keeps separate plate and drinking glass for his assistant. Another priest says that the beef-eating Pariahs can never improve their mental faculties. Nuns say that 'those boys and girls from that street are not meant for class rooms'. How can people with attitudes like these ever implement CBCI's or TNBC's recommendations?

The origin of Dalit Christian Liberation Movement

The origin of Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM) in Tamilnadu is surely not the product of any liberation theology or of any leftist ideology but is purely a product of the local church which has betrayed the hope of the poor. We Dalits are disenfranchised with the church authorities and their attitudes towards us. Those of us fighting against the church either individually or in small groups, were either taken to task and/or subjected to severe ecclesiastical sanctions. But today, we have decided to organize ourselves and agitate against the injustice perpetrated against us within the church. DCLM is our organization. The organizing themes are: Tamil church is Dalit church; Dalit is dignified.

DCLM functions on the sociological assumption that when long and protracted negotiation and dialogue have failed, confrontation becomes inevitable. The movement is very strong in eight out of fourteen dioceses in Tamilnadu. The Dalit Catholics in Madras-Mylapore, Palayamkottai and Tanjore demonstrated in front of the bishop's house demanding their rights. Nearly 500 members demonstrated before the fourteen bishops when they had their annual meeting in Vellore on January 1990. The high point of that meeting was people's choice of freedom to bishops' blessings. Another crowd confronted the Jesuits of the Madurai Province when they had their Provincial Congregation on March 1990. When the Holy See chose to appoint a non-dalit, bishop of Trichinopoly on December 30, 1990, nearly 750 dalits showed black flags and courted arrest. On the same day the Dalit Catholics throughout Tamilnadu boycotted the liturgy. The people of Pondicherry diocese are putting up a relentless fight for the past three years against the church authorities, demanding their rights. They showed black flags on the occasion of their bishop's jubilee and courted arrest. Twenty four youths, including nine girls, from Palayamkottai diocese undertook a fast unto death.

It was only on the fifth day the church authorities came to the negotiating table. And that too due to the pressure from the government authorities and the police force. Our struggle for justice continues unabated.

DCLM pitted against the church

This conflict approach of DCLM has pitted the dalit christians and DCLM against the church authorities. Not only justice is denied them but their very aspiration is killed by new types of oppression. The dalit Catholics, particularly those who are actively involved in DCLM, are victimized, and denied sacraments. Teachers are transferred, and promotions withheld. Admissions and appointments are denied in schools. The arch-bishop of Pondicherry in his pastoral letter exhorts the dalit Christians not to join DCLM. Priests everywhere use the pulpits to instruct the faithful not to participate in DCLM activities. In some dioceses priests have organized the upper caste christians against the dalit christians, which led to caste clash. Priests in Pondicherry diocese have divided the dalit christians and served liquor and lured them with money to induce one party to beat the other group. Nuns have refused to treat the dalit patients in their clinics. One bishop has threatened to invoke canonical sanctions against Ideas Centre, a social action centre for Madurai Province, from where DCLM carries out its activities. Another bishop has instructed the nuns not to associate with the priests of the Ideas Centre. The Church authorities have declared DCLM the avowed enemy of the catholic church.

The case of Fr. Gnanapragasam, a dalit priest from Palayamkottai diocese, reveals rather nakedly the church's attitude towards Dalits and DCLM. Fr Gnanapragasam as a correspondent of schools at Chidamrapuram parish, ignoring the seniority list of the diocese in which most of the Dalit teachers do not find any berth, appointed four Dalit teachers. The bishop immediately divested him of his responsibilities in the school. The irate Dalits closed nearly eighteen schools as a sign of protest against the bishop's high handed action which led to a very violent police clash. Though Fr Gnanapragasam was not on the spot, the FIR lists him as number one accused. Using this criminal charge against him, the bishop serves a decree of removal and takes him away from the parish. What happened to Fr Gnanapragasam

after the criminal charge is of no concern to the bishop. The priest was hiding in a forest to protect himself. Though Fr Gnanapragasam felt he should present himself to his bishop, one of his fellow priests warned him not to do so lest the bishop might hand him over to the police. For the past ten months he is virtually under house arrest in the bishop's house.

Now the bishops of Tamilnadu are bent on dividing and destroying the leadership of DCLM. The SC/ST commissions and the multipurpose society of every diocese create splinter Dalit movements and confuse the dalits, which lead to infights among them. Fr Antony Raj S. J., the writer of this article, has been the President of DCLM since its inception. The bishops attribute all the 'confusions' in the church to his leadership and they are hell bent to get rid of him. Unfortunately, they have persuaded Fr General of the Society of Jesus and the Provincial of Madurai in their efforts. I have been asked to step down by the end of April 1992. As a jesuit, do I have choice? But as a dalit and leader of a movement I do have a choice.

The bishops' tirade against DCLM is based on certain questionable accusations. First, they allege that the Jesuits are behind DCLM. The Society of Jesus is also organized around caste structures, identities and interests. So far power has been circulating among the Vellala and Udayar Jesuits and the resources and opportunities are distributed among them. The present composition of teachers in the Jesuit schools and colleges is a clear proof of their caste loyalties. It is to hide this caste based politics of the province that the dalit option has been pushed to the front. If the Jesuits were really serious about this option, which they have been talking since 1975, they should have turned some of their colleges into Dalit Colleges. Instead, some even object to the policy of reservations in their schools and colleges. To put the record straight the Jesuits can never claim to have started DCLM. All that they have done is to have lent the service of a dalit Jesuit priest, that too rather reluctantly, to be the president of DCLM, and a few others to work for the movement. The bishop's allegation against the Jesuits is a move to dislodge the leadership and make the movement defunct.

The second accusation is that DCLM is a caste movement that goes against the unity of the church. To start with, dalits

are not a caste, but are outcast. Only an outcast group can legitimately fight for a casteless society. Even if we concede for the sake of argument that dalit is a caste, are there not other caste-based organizations in the catholic church? There are Nadar, Thevar, Udayar, Vellalar Catholic Associations. How come, that the church authorities never raised their voice against these caste-based non-dalit organizations? Is it not discriminatory just to condemn DCLM, not other caste organizations?

The third accusation is that DCLM advocates violence. DCLM eschews any form, covert or overt, of premeditated violence. We do admit there had been couple of violent incidences which were strongly condemned by the dalit leaders. When we compare with the church monitored violence against the Dalits, ours pales into insignificance. The structural violence inflicted by the Church on us has left us maimed for ages. But no one takes notice of the continued structural violence of the Church. I would like to emphasize that DCLM does not and will not advocate any form of violence. By the same token it has to be added that those who make peaceful revolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable.

The fourth accusation is that DCLM has touched the sacred aspects of the Church's sacramental life and authority structure. Only when the local priests refused to administer sacraments to the Dalit Catholics for their involvement in DCLM, did some dalit Jesuit priests and even some lay dalit Catholics start administering sacraments. We would like to make two things very clear. First, if the bishops and priests use the sacraments, which are meant to be liberative signs, as a mechanism for social control, then we feel we are justified to use the same sacraments to liberate people. Second, for us, a human being and his or her dignity is more sacred than any sacrament. This is surely good theology. For it is the human person that has been made in the image and likeness of God and sacraments have been made for the human person, not the other way round. Did not Jesus say: "the Sabbath was made for man, nor man for the Sabbath"? Man is more sacred than the sacraments.

Fifth is that DCLM creates a problem of law and order for the Church. Based on this assumption, the Church has used the police goondas and other repressive forces to 'put us in our place'. First,

before calling us law-breakers, Church authorities might indulge in some introspection. Is it not their failure to do justice to the dalits that has created the so-called law and order problem in the Church? As a rule only the ruling class raises the bogey of law and order. When the Church raises the same cry, is it not admitting that it too belongs to the same class? If this is so, we must identify as such and do what we have to do to bring about our liberation. Finally, it has to be said that if law and order is a problem for the Church, for us poor dalits it is justice which is *the* issue, and we will not compromise justice for anything else.

Reflections and observations

This survey of the struggles of Dalit Christians in Tamilnadu has thrown up a number of concerns. I put them here in the form of questions for reflection:

- 1) Why is it that the Church which is a body committed to the defence of human dignity and should have been the first to redress the violence perpetrated on and the injustice done to dalits, could have so stoutly resisted the dalits' cry for justice?
- 2) Why is it that the Church seems to respond more readily to violence than to moral force? The dalit Catholics in Palayamkottai diocese had been appealing to the Church authorities for justice through dialogue, negotiation, peaceful protest and token fasts. Even the decision of 24 youths to sacrifice their lives by undertaking a fast unto death did not move the Church. Only when John Pandyan, a dalit leader who believes strongly in social change through violence, threatened dire consequences, did the government practically force the Church authorities to the negotiating table. Does this mean that moral force has no place in the Church? Is it not shameful that the government has to mediate between Church authorities and Dalit Catholics?
- 3) How is it that the Church can descend to using repressive measures to contain the DCLM? It is only when a ruler loses legitimacy to rule his people that he takes to repressive measures to restore his legitimacy. Is this what has happened to the Church? Does it believe that it will be able to restore legitimacy by force?
- 4) Has not the Church committed an unforgivable sin in betraying the hope of the poor? The practice of untouchability and the abysmal poverty of the dalits are acts of social and physical death to millions of dalits. They are a massive attack on God's plan.

unfolded at creation, to give life. By permitting the practice of untouchability and tolerating the poverty of the dalits, is not the Church going against God's absolute basic will for creatures, that is for their existence?

5) Finally, has not the Church come to depend more on Mammon than on Christ? Gandhiji in one of his conversations with Christian leaders said, "I think that you cannot serve God and Mammon, both, and my fear is that Mammon has been sent to serve India and that God has remained behind, with the result that He will one day have His vengeance. ... I have always felt that when a religious organization has more money than it requires, it is in peril of losing its faith in God, and pinning its faith on money. ... The fact is, the moment financial stability is assured spiritual bankruptcy is also assured." This self explanatory statement needs no further elucidation.

Conclusion

This is the dalit Christian reality in Tamilnadu. I am sure the conditions of dalit Christians are the same elsewhere. Socio-logically, as I said in the beginning, the Church functions like a system of social closure. The thirty percent non-dalits are strongly ensconced in power and recruit priests and nuns, the future power-brokers, from their own communities. The distribution of resources and opportunities follows a well defined caste line. Through a downward exercise of power the non-dalits have been preventing the majority in the Church, the dalits from having access to positions of power, resources and opportunities. The deprived Catholics, through the DCLM are trying to exercise power from below to break the non-dalit monopoly. But the Church authorities instead of listening to the legitimate demands of the poor dalits, have not spared any effort to destroy the movement and thus kill the hope of the poor.

These are the basic dynamics at work. Faced with it our stance is clear. When a reporter for *Asia Focus* asked me what I expected from the Church, my answer was: "Honestly, the Church being part of the problem, we dalits do not expect any solution from the Church. Our message is clear. We are a large majority and so it is our church. We tell the non-dalits, move away from the centre stage graciously, or else we will have to occupy it by force..." The battle is between the conscienceless power of caste-ridden clergy and the powerless conscience of the dalits. As far as we are concerned we will die on our feet rather than bend the knee before insolent might.

Yahweh the Defender of the Dalits

A Reflection on Isaiah 3:12-15

Every Prophet is a critic, but not every critic a prophet. A Prophet may criticize and condemn at times the entire nation of Israel; but whenever he specifies certain groups, it is always those classes or individuals in the country who wield power, social, political, military or religious. Kings, priests, judges, generals and the rich fight against a prophet (Jer. 1:18), because they are the targets of his attack (Jer. 22:13-19; Mic. 3:1,9-12; Am. 5:12; Hos 4:4-10 etc.). In fact the beginnings of Israel's prophetic movement are usually traced back to the period of Samuel when power got centralized — and therefore absolutized — to such an extent, that one and the same person, namely Samuel, was exercising social, political and religious powers. When power is centralized, oppressive power-structures emerge. In a monarchical system such centralized power becomes a yoke. Prophecy, as God's voice, comes to the national stage precisely when the masses feel helpless in the stranglehold of oppressive centralized power. Every prophet therefore is bound to hurl diatribes at kings and his cronies. And the more crushing these power-structures, the more vehement a prophet's attack on them. In Israel, the pre-exilic period was witness to oppressive power amassed in a monarchical structure. The valiant and virulent pre-exilic prophets who denounced this tyranny of power are therefore rightly called the prophets of the golden age!

We might be helped to understand and grasp the emotive thrust and spiritual frame-work of the prophets if we recall to mind that prophets are God-intoxicated persons. They are capable of holding in their hearts the emotions that surge up in the heart of God. And the God experienced by the pre-exilic prophets is a morally outraged God. This God, who hears the cries of the

oppressed (Ex. 3:7-9; 22:23-27 etc.), inspires the prophets so intensely that they get the experience of a God who roars like a lion (Am. 3:8), rends like a wild beast (Hos. 13:7-8), slays and blasts like a dynamite (Hos. 6:5; Is. 9:8). The act of this God who avenges the poor on the criminal power-puffs is so really felt by the prophets in their proclamation that they with thorough matter-of-factness speak of God directly coming to judge (Is. 3:12-15; Mic. 6:1ff; Hos. 4:1ff etc).

God, the defender of the poor

In this context, the text of Is. 3:12-15 merits special attention. This great prophet endowed with great cultural and educational clout belonged in fact to the uppermost social stratum of Judah. He was schooled in the imperial court theology of Jerusalem and therefore passionately loved the city, its traditions and its people. Yet, when he saw the pathetic plight of the defenceless classes, he called the citizenry of Jerusalem "You rulers of Sodom, you people of Gomorrah (1:10; cf. 1:17). These rulers are further branded as rebels, companions of thieves and lovers of bribes (1:23). The constellation and escalation of Jerusalem's sinfulness necessitated Yahweh's judgement on it. The Yahwist, in his story of the tower of Babel, too speaks of arrogance of power making imperative God's intervention (Gen. 11:1-9).

The Lord appears in Is. 3:12-15 as the defender of the poor, accuser and judge of the oppressors. In its present form the two originally independent units — 3:1-9 and 3:12-15 — build a coherent whole: vv. 1-9 describe how the Lord had punished Jerusalem and Judah for their sins, and then, with dramatic turn, the judgement scene opens out in vv. 12-15. This scene is introduced by accusation in v. 12 which necessitates Yahweh's appearance. Although there is mention of people, God's judgement is clearly on the ruling class (cf. 1:10). The term for rulers denotes in the Hebrew the equivalent of a taskmaster or a tormentor. They are branded as inept; to have such men as rulers is disgrace and punishment. The mention of elders shows, how even the one-time tribal leaders, who used to be the voice and pulse of their respective tribes and administrators of justice at the city gate, are now hand in glove with the princes who hold political and military power in the monarchical regime. Opportunism pointed out to the elders that, making common cause with thieves in despoiling the helpless was a surer guarantee for a better future

than being at the service of justice. The prophet does not mince words when speaking of Judah's princes: Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them (1:23).

The elders and rulers have not only abdicated their supreme duty of protecting the defenceless, but have become themselves oppressors, crushing the poor! The expression, "it is you who have devoured the vineyard" is perhaps itself a proverb, like the proverb in Malayalam which says "the fence itself devours the crops"! Instead of guarding the vineyard, lest the shoots of the vines should be devoured by intruding animals, the elders and rulers of Judah plunder it. The Hebrew equivalent of the word 'spoil' usually refers to stolen goods, but here it may be the case of economic oppression legalized by unjust laws (10:1ff), judicial corruption, bribery etc. (cf. 1:23; 5:7; 8:20-23; Am. 3:10; 5:11:12 etc.).

The plight of the people is described in 3:15 as getting crushed or pulverized between upper and lower millstones. Such oppression smashes the body and crushes the spirit. What galls most in oppression is the painful and humiliating awareness of the crushed that they are totally helpless in the face of ruthless injustice perpetrated on them with full backing of corrupt power. Any and every human being with a modicum of humaneness, would, on seeing the fate of the poor, make his own the words of Qoheleth: "And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them" (Qoh. 4:1-2).

The God of Isaiah

Isaiah received his call in the year king Uzziah died, namely, in 742 B. C. Under Uzziah, who ruled from 783 to 742 B. C., the kingdom of Judah made great economic progress unparalleled since the days of Solomon¹. But this economic boom was accompanied by religious and social decay. Economic and social disparities marred the face of the community of God's chosen people. The wealthy and the influential had unjust laws (Is. 10:

1 Cf. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, London, 1966, p. 240.

1-4) to legalize their latifundism (Is 5:8; Mic. 2:2). Judges sold justice to the highest bidder (Is 2:23; 5:20-23; Mic. 3:9-11). Atrocities on the poor could be indulged in with impunity (2:9; Mic. 3:1-4; 9-11). The Arrogance of wealth was reflected in the life-style of the wicked (Is. 3:16-4:1; 5:11-22; Am. 6:4-7). The oppressions of Egypt returned to Palestine, and the cry of the oppressed rose to God from his own vineyard (Is. 5:7). An extravagant cult (Is. 1:10-17) stood as a sort of whitewash over moral disintegration. Official religion both knowingly and unknowingly degenerated into cultcraft and projected a God who was not bothered about the misery of the poor. It was in such a situation of social apostasy and religious debauchery that Isaiah was sent out by Yahweh with a stunning experience of God's holiness and the shuddering awareness of its consequences upon a people of unclean lips (Is. 6). No wonder then, Isaiah brings the God of holiness as avenger of the poor and judge over the oppressors. This God cannot calm down his nerves and conscience when the oppressed cry to him (Ex. 3:7f; 22:22-24, 26-27). He is the stronghold of the oppressed (Ps. 9:10); he is angered and outraged when the poor are crushed (Is. 3:15); he will despoil those who despoil the poor (Prov. 22:22f). His concern for the poor is so great that he goes to the extent of identifying himself with them (Prov. 14:31; 19:17; cf. Mt. 25:40-45). Nay, he calls them "my people" (Is. 3:15; Ps. 72:2; Mic. 3:1-4), "my sheep" (Ez. 34:19).

In fact, going through the various epochs of salvation history, we never find any act of God in favour of the rich. The beneficiaries of the great saving acts of God are always the poor. He chose the patriarchal tribes of landless and rootless people to begin this great history. It was a band of oppressed slaves that he liberated from Egypt; he wandered with them in the wilderness, sharing their fate, feeding them, guiding them, chastising them, but always as their God. During the monarchical period he thundered through the prophets as the voice of the silent agony of the oppressed masses. From Babylon he gathered the smitten remnant and brought them back to Palestine. In the fulness of time he clothed himself with flesh and walked on earth as the friend of the discriminated and marginalized sections of Palestine.

This God of the poor demands that all those who believe in him be Yahweh-like by championing the cause of the poor.

True worship for Yahweh believers ought to consist in learning to do good, correcting oppression, defending the fatherless and pleading for the widows (Is. 1:17). Believers in Yahweh should not seek him in and through cult, but in and through the struggle for justice (Am. 5:4-5; 14-15). The fruits that Yahweh expects from his beloved vineyard are justice and righteousness (Is. 5:7). He makes his will as clear as day light that he loves mercy, not sacrifice, knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hos. 6:6). Israel will "know" her God and be his beloved spouse only when she practises justice, righteousness, faithfulness, steadfast love and mercy (Hos. 2:19-20; 4:1). From times immemorial it has been revealed to Israel what is the good that Yahweh requires of her: it is nothing more and nothing less than to do justice and to love kindness, which alone can be termed walking wisely with the Lord (Mic. 6:8). The fast that Yahweh chooses is to liberate people from all forms of bondage, "to share your bread with the hungry, to clothe the naked and to bring the homeless poor into your house" (Is. 58:6-7). The community of his believers will be spiritually alive, not when they worship him, but when justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Am. 5:24).

Whenever Israel, in imitation of her neighbouring religions, forgot the practice of moral virtues – justice, righteousness, mercy, steadfast love and faithfulness – and indulged herself in cultic practices, she was reproached for it in the harshest possible terms (Is. 1:10-17; Am. 5:21-24; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:1-8; Jer. 7:21-28; Zech. 7:1-14. cf. also Prov. 21:3; Sirach 34:18-22). The prophets' criticism of cult makes it abundantly clear, that in the practice of true religion, actions directed towards God are to be replaced by actions directed towards the poor. The priestly instructions in the Bible (e. g. Ps. 15; Ps. 24:3-6; Is. 33:14-16), the description of a righteous man (Ez. 18:6-9), the explanation how to amend one's life (Jer. 7:5-6), references to God's will in polemic against practices of piety (Zech. 7:9-10; Ps. 50; 51:16-17 etc) and other similar themes emphasize how in the religion of Yahweh there is no substitute for mercy towards the poor. In the New Testament St James too makes it clear (James 1:27).

Ideal reign

Nausea, repugnance and indignation over the present situation of crushing oppression and ruthless violence on the hapless

masses churned up Isaiah's faith to hope for a new world with an ideal king. The story of Judah's kings from David and Solomon till Jotham, the king during the first period of Isaiah's prophetic ministry², was the story of betrayal. But the prophet who has strong faith in the dogma of the chosenness of the Davidic dynasty, sanguinely hopes for a shoot from the stump of Jesse (Is. 11:1) namely, for a second David. This ideal king will give justice to the poor (the impoverished) and the meek (the oppressed), by slaying the rich and the oppressors (Is. 11:4). The same hope is given in Is. 32:1-8, where the prophet looks to an ideal king who will reign in righteousness and whose princes will rule in justice. As a result, the fools and knaves who are greeted as "their Excellencies and their Honours" today by their sycophants will be put in their place, and the poor will have security and safety. Then the meek (the oppressed) and the poor (the impoverished) shall obtain joy in the Lord (Is. 29:19-20). Authority is for service to the poor, and in order to serve Yahweh's poor, it is necessary for a god-fearing king to destroy the enemies of Yahweh and his people! Isaiah firmly believed that king and kingdom are integral to God's design of salvation for Israel. Yet, throne and king are for establishing and fostering steadfast love, faithfulness, justice and righteousness: "then a throne will be established in steadfast love (*hesed*) and on it will sit in faithfulness (*emeth*) in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice (*mishpāt*) and is swift to do righteousness (*sedaqah*) (Is. 16:5. cf. 9:7 and Hos. 4:1; 2: 19-20).

Who are the poor Isaiah talks about? The woe-oracle in 10:1-4 pronounces death³ on legislators who put laws into effect which oppressed three groups of people: the widows, the orphans and the needy. These three groups of people have no power in society and are therefore easily sinned against (Am. 4:1; 5:11; 8:4; Is. 3:14) and are denied justice in the courts of law (Ex. 23:6-8; Am. 5:12; Is. 10:2; Jer. 5:28). The widow has no husband to protect her, the orphans have no parents to take care of them, and the needy or the poor have no money to satisfy

2 The oracle in Is. 3:12-15 is presumed in this article to have been pronounced by the prophet during the reign of Jotham (742 – 735 B. C.).

3 Hoy (woe) originated from Israel's funeral rites. Prophets pronounce hoy on leaders who, by their death-bringing evil deeds, lead the nation to death. cf. E. Jenni, art. hoy in THAT vol. I, Munchen, 1978, col. 476.

their needs. The people of God are exhorted to have a special concern for these groups. But it is the supreme duty of those among the people who hold authority to use their power which comes to them from their god-given authority for giving justice to the defenceless classes (cf. Ps. 72:1-2; 12-14). Knowledge of God in the Old Testament signifies religion. A king who knows the Lord will give justice to the poor (Is. 11:2-5). Jeremiah puts it in the form of a question implying thereby that every believer in Yahweh ought to know this basic, fundamental truth, namely, to know the Lord is to give justice to the poor and needy (Jer. 22:16). The anchor of Jerusalem's court theology was the dogma of the Davidic covenant. Although this covenant is promissory in its wording (II Sam. 7), Isaiah, a firm believer in this dogma, understands it conditionally when he exhorts Achaz to believe (Is. 7:9b). Jeremiah makes the survival of this dynasty explicitly conditioned on executing justice and righteousness which in concrete means concern for and partisanship with the defenceless classes (Jer. 22:1-5).

Proverbs played an important role in the education and training especially of kings and his officers. Isaiah received an excellent education in the wisdom schools of Jerusalem. This is manifested in his masterful use of the Hebrew language as well as in the high cultural level of his teachings. As a young pupil he received instructions in very clear terms on the obligations of power toward the defenceless (Prov. 22:22-3; 23:10-11; 29:14; 28:15; 31:8-9). These instructions forcefully drive home to the pupils that the poor have an avenger in God, and if the rulers oppress the poor, this God will come to judge them. This is what Isaiah pictures in 1:24-25; 3:12-15; 10:3. He exhorts the rulers (1:10) to defend the fatherless and plead for the widows (1:17); he pronounces woe – and thereby death, cf. 6:5 – on legislators who write iniquitous decrees (10:1); and he condemns evil rulers as murderers, rebels and companions of thieves (1:21-23). In all these texts the heart of the prophet aches for the helpless trio of widows (1:17; 1:23; 10:2), orphans (1:17; 1:23; 10:2) and the poor (3:14f; 10:2). The greedy land grabber exploits them (5:8), the unscrupulous legislators make laws to loot them (10:2) and the courts of law deny them justice (1:23; 5:20, 23). Jerusalem, the joy of Isaiah's heart and the delight of his eyes, was once a faithful city, full of justice, and righteousness lodged in her; but

the sins of her rulers made her a harlot, and murderers now lodge in her (1:21); nay, she is no better than Sodom and Gomorrah (1:10)! The prophet from Nazareth too would one day have to shed bitter tears over the same city (Lk. 19:41).

Isaiah in India of Today

The message of the prophets has its relevance today. Of all the various and varied oracles the prophets left us, their diatribes against those who oppress the weak are perhaps the most frighteningly relevant ones to our Indian situation. In the place of widows, orphans and the needy, we must put the dalits. Indignities that are being perpetrated on the dalits of India are certainly more heart-rending than those denounced by the eighth century prophets of Israel. The helpless ones of our country are victims, not of injustice only, but of dastardly outrage. As in the days of the prophets, so also today there is power on the side of the malefactors. Injustices suffered by the dalits are, broadly speaking, those relating to property-wage-money on one side and to body and person on the other⁴.

Isaiah denounced legislators who keep on writing iniquitous decrees in order to loot the defenceless classes. The rules, norms and conditionalities imposed on the poor nations by the blood-sucking G-7, the IMF, their multinationals and others, the traps they set and the pits they dig for the poor nations through GATT, IPR etc. can be left out in our reflections for focusing our attention more on the national scene than on the international one; although these economic colonizers are the real and ultimate culprits who turn this world into a veritable hell for the vast majority of humans who populate it. On the national level, ordinances, laws, acts etc. are issued and passed galore in each and every session of the parliament. A good many of them aim at suppressing legitimate uprisings of exploited sections, or at exterminating them under the cry and camouflage of law and order. Projects and programmes by the hundred are not lacking in our country for helping the poor. But in order to receive the loans, subsidies, bonus etc. from these apparently laudable and much touted schemes, the poor have to run from pillar to post, enervated by the maze of

4 Cf. D. Bandyopadhyay, "Grassroots Justice: Law, System and People" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XXVI (1991) pp. 2240-2243.

red-tapes; and, if by a miracle, they get some help, by that time they will have spent almost an equal amount by way of bribes to the officers, from the door-keeper of the office to the greedy big shot who sits on top! Can we find conscientious judges anywhere in our country who feel free to pass honest and just verdicts when and where the interests of the ruling party or those of its members or fellow-travellers are implicated?

Denying justice to the poor is the unwritten motto of our judicial system. Felons with economic and/or political power can commit any crime in our country with absolute certainty to get acquitted in the courts, if at all these get charge-sheeted. For fear of brutal reprisals from the goondas and thugs of such criminals people do not dare to go to the courts to seek justice. When vandalism and mayhem are let loose in a village, the police will arrive only after the "operation" is completed and then, their main concern will be to protect the political and social upper class vandals from the ire of the outraged poor! Or, these protectors of order and morality may themselves charge at the poor, making their miseries and ignominies even worse!

Prophets speak of crimes and atrocities on widows and orphans. Every day in our holy India so many harijan women are being sinned against, be it in the form of flesh-trade, heavy loads and unjust quotas of work, rape, discrimination in wages, bride-burning, wife-beating and a hundred and one other forms of harassment, molestation, physical attack etc. Oppression of orphans, so vehemently denounced by the prophets, comes now-here near the wide-spread practice of child-labour that thrives in our factories, estates, hotels etc. Many institutions with fine philanthropic names are often centres for stealing and trafficking in human organs, and in this devilish business, the victims are mostly poor children!

Bribes, in the past used to be given to officers for inducing them to do what they were forbidden to do; today bribes and gifts are to be given for making the members of our civil force do their duty; often they openly and shamelessly ask for the amounts they themselves have fixed for each and every duty they do, big as well as small! Natural calamities like floods, earthquakes etc. are occasions for relief agencies and their workers to make good money. Amounts released for relief work end up in the

pockets of officers. The spoil of the poor is indeed in the house of our politicians and pseudo-social workers (Is 3:14)! !

The latifundism denounced by the prophets of the Old Testament serves just to make us laugh in our sleeves because the criminally huge landholdings of our politicians, religious institutions and church dignitaries, not to speak of conventional landlords, are so big as to defy any contrast or comparison with the former!!

Where are the prophets in and for modern India? Do the christian churches function as the conscience of the nation? In an unjust society, faith ought to be militant, although militancy does not necessarily imply use of violence, which none-the-less cannot be excluded if demanded by the thrust of faith and the urgency of the situation. If faith is awareness and commitment to God, then siding with the poor becomes the inescapable imperative of faith in today's context; for both Yahweh of the Old Testament and Jesus of the New Testament reveal to us a God who is defender of the oppressed and the neglected. Having faith in Jesus is identical with having the compassion and concern that He had for the poor. If so, the duty of the church would be neither social analysis nor theological synthesis to be dished out in erudite church documents, but to acquire and articulate sensitivity to the plight of the poor. Such articulation will not be a voice of conscientization of the poor, but the very voice itself of the poor expressing their pent-up frustrations and energizing them to struggle and fight without collapsing. Do we really have such a prophetic church in India?

The Indian church is authority conscious vis-à-vis the christian laity, and a coward vis-à-vis the political powers-that-be. First, the authority the church is conscious of, is one that comes from above, in the fashion and arrogance of monarchical power. This stands diametrically opposed to the authority her founder spoke of (Mk. 10:42-45) and demonstrated in a telling way (Jn. 13:1-16). Authority in the Old Testament was for service to the poor (Jer. 22:16; Is. 11:4-5; Ps. 72:2,12-14; Prov. 31:8-9 etc), because it was an authority that came from the God who hears the cry of the poor and avenges them (Ex. 3:7-9; Ex. 22:22-24; 26-27). Such god-given authority should be used for defending the defenceless against the offenders. We have a church that

prolongs the agony of the masses by preaching submissiveness to the poor and generosity to the rich!

This policy and proclivity of the church comes from its sickening minority-complex, pre-occupation with her interests, institutions and other sources of income, and a spineless dependence on the West. The prophets and their school of followers were miniscule minorities in their days; and precisely this made them supremely free in and for God. This freedom in God or rootedness in God in turn made them fearlessly free for and with God's people, the poor! They had no interests or institutions to safeguard, nor were they obsessed with money. Only those who build their palaces and cathedrals on the rock of Mammon rather than on the rock of faith, are to be wary in their utterances, lest they antagonize or displease a government that can stop the inflow of foreign money! The same cowardliness and fear would make them toe the line of those who supply them with offices, prebends and patronage! Are we to seek anywhere else the reason why the church does not pronounce woe to the rich, so explicitly and emphatically done by Jesus? The poor, and only the poor, are God's people (Is. 3:15; Ez. 34:19; Ps. 72:2), for to them belongs the kingdom of God (Lk. 6:20) and they, and they alone, can enter into it (Lk 18:25). A church that does not want to lose the crumbs that fall into her coffers from the table of the rich, a church that will be forced to tell her own conscience that she does not belong either to God or to his kingdom because of the Mammon in her, opts to keep mum about this truth of God's kingdom!

A church, cushioned in poor India, owning assets that equal those owned by the industrial magnates of this country, and yet, unashamedly waving a banner of 'service to the poor and commitment to national progress', will naturally and necessarily close herself into her own cocoon, lost in squabbles of rites, jurisdiction, wolf-crying in notions of beliefs, and eager to avail herself of any and every opportunity to manifest subservience to the bossy high-ups in the West. The maximum that one can expect from this church is an occasional document on irrelevant thematics in bombastic pedantry!! No wonder, then, that the palace theologians and mode-crazy spiritualist of this ecclesiastical industry, with full support and benediction from

its snobbish and grade-conscious officials, practise and propagate from their five-star ashrams and colossal institutions, elitistic forms of worship, mental exercises, bodily postures etc. badged with fanciful names, proclaiming these as exercises and practice of prayer !!!

Is. 3:12-15 and other prophetic oracles of same or similar verve and vein were accusations, verdicts and the beginning of the execution of these verdicts, all in one; for a word that goes forth from the mouth of God shall not return to him empty (Is. 55:10f)! God's verdict on unjust schemes of things that oppress his poor had its toll in history; but still the word and verdict of God needs further and further execution, because new forms and agents of oppression replace the old ones. The word of God does, and will continue to, march through contemporary history, shaking and shaping it, so that God's justice may give His people, the poor the righteousness they so direly need. The church can either wake up to this urge of the hour or can feign bliss in the paradise of her fools !!

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The Cry of the Dalits

An Interpretation of Psalm 140

In a society where the defenceless and innocent people are kept under constant structural oppression, they often fail to obtain a hearing for their cause from the authorities. A just and fair treatment from others remains only a dream or a wishful thinking. They undergo immense interior sufferings and not rarely even physical violence and atrocities committed by the high-handed oppressors. The innocent sufferers can only cry out to God who, they hope, at least will intervene in order to bring about a right turn of events and a consequent just society.

In Indian society, the most glaring form of social oppression is, no doubt, the oppression imposed and perpetuated on the dalits. The psychological anguish they endure and the physical violence they suffer, are immeasurable. Any attempt they make for betterment or any reaction they show, is interpreted as revolt against "the established order", or shouted down as violence against "the harmless benefactors". Political leaders do not dare stand for the cause of the dalits. If ever someone tries to remedy the situation, he is either branded as subversive or banned from authority. In situations like this, political black-mail and governmental manipulation are strongly operative. The dalits are helpless and defenceless, and their "voice of supplication" to God for liberation rings out in words like these:

The cry for help: Psalm 140¹

2. Rescue me, Yahweh, from evil man,
from the man of violence protect me.
3. Because they plan evil things in heart,
all the day they conspire warfare.

1. Verse 1 in the Hebrew text is the title, i. e. 'For the director. A psalm of David'.

4. They sharpen their tongue like a serpent,
the viper's venom is under their lips.
5. Guard me, Yahweh, from the hands of the wicked,
from the man of violence protect me.
Because they plan to trip up my feet,
6. the arrogant have hidden a trap for me,
The corrupt have spread out a net,
by way-side have set snares for me.
7. I said, "O Yahweh², my God you are,
give ear, Yahweh, to my voice of supplication.
8. Yahweh, my Lord, fortress of my safety,
shelter my head in the day of battle.
9. Grant not, Yahweh, the desires of the wicked,
his evil design do not promote, O Exalted !"³
10. Those who surround me with mischief —
may the poison of their lips drown them !⁴
11. Upon them may burning coals be heaped,
into the Fire may he cast them,
From the deep Pit let them not rise!⁵
12. The man of tongue — let him not be established in the land;
the man of violence — may Evil hunt him into banishment !
13. I know that Yahweh will maintain
the cause of the oppressed, the right of the poor.
14. Surely, the just shall give thanks to your name,
the upright shall dwell before your face.

2 The lamedh in *layhwh* is taken as vocative particle. See Dahood, M., *Psalms I* (AB, 16, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1966), pp. xxi, xl, 87. Idem, VT 16 (1966), 309; Idem, *Psalms III* (AB, 17A, Doubleday, Garden City N. Y. 1970), p. 302.

3 For the discussion on *yarûmû*, rendered as vocative, "O Exalted", see Dahood, M., *Psalms III*, p. 303; Idem, *Biblica* 61 (1980), 277-8. This suggestion has been endorsed by Ravasi, G., *Il Libro dei Salmi III* (Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna, 1984), pp. 839-40.

4 This verse is a crux for translators. See discussion, Dahood, M., *Psalms III*, pp. 303-4, whose rendering has been adopted here with a small modification: cf. Ps. 69:22, *ro's* = poison. Ravasi, G., op. cit. p. 840, prefers to render the verse as "La malizia delle loro labbra, li colpisca al capo" = "the malice of their lips — may it strike them on head!"

5. The verse involves quite a few textual and translational problems. See Ravasi, G., op. cit. pp. 840-1; Dahood, M., *Psalms III*, pp. 304-5; Idem, *CBQ* 41 (1979), 604-7. I have preferred the suggestion of the latter

Who is the speaker in Ps.140?

That the psalm is a lament, is unanimously accepted. But when an attempt is made to identify the speaker concretely, there is difference of opinion. Some authors take this psalm to be an individual lament by a just man who is persecuted⁶. Others think that the psalmist is a person who has become a victim of magical practices⁷; or that he might have been under preventive detention, awaiting judgment⁸. Another possibility that has been suggested is that this psalm refers to the vindication of the right of asylum⁹.

Taking Ps.140 as a collective lament, some scholars identify the speaker as the people of God and the enemies as the gentiles¹⁰. But in the text itself, there is nothing to show that the antagonists of the speaker are gentile nations. Some others see as the background of Ps.140 the partisan movements or party politics of post-exilic times within the people of Israel¹¹.

A better way of identifying the speaker of the psalm is to survey the social situation and the forces behind it, which this psalm graphically describes, and see from whose mouth the cry could have come¹².

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6. E.g. Anderson, A.A., *The Book of Psalms* Vol. II (New Century Bible Commentary, Grand Rapids, 1981), p. 914; Dahood, M., *Psalms III*, p. 301; Ravasi, G., op. cit. p. 832.
 7. E.g. S. Mowinkel and Maillot-Lelievre, according to Ravasi, G., op. cit. p. 831.
 8. H. Schmidt proposed this hypothesis in 1928 and Ps.140 falls under the category of the protests of one's innocence: Cf. Aletti, J. N.—Trublet, J., *Approche poétique et théologique des psaumes*, "Initiations" (Les éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1983), p. 163.
 9. Ibid. cf. p. 163.
 10. E.g. Briggs, C. A., *The Book of Psalms* (A Critical and Exegetical Commentary — The International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh, 1976) Vol. II, cf. p. 503. According to him, the psalm was composed in the troublous times prior to Nehemiah's reforms.
 11. Oesterly, W. O. E., *The Psalms* (S. P. C. K. London, 1955), writes: "There are expressions in this psalm which support the contention that it reflects the bitterness of party strife among the Jews", p. 558. The antagonists of the psalmist are "those who are in an influential position, and this can only mean the ruling classes, in this case the priestly aristocracy, represented in later days, by the Sadducean party" — p. 560. Kirkpatrick, A.F., (ed) *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge at the University Press, 1957), thinks that the antagonists belong to a worldly and unscrupulous party. cf. p. 793.
 12. For want of any concrete features, a date cannot be assigned to this psalm.

The situation of oppression

There is no doubt that the vigour and pathos of this psalm point to its having sprung from the actual experience of the author¹³. The psalm depicts the situation of a society where there are two categories of people represented: the lawless oppressors who exercise violence against the loyal oppressed¹⁴. We shall study in some detail the description of the oppressors in the psalm, by examining the nouns that designate them, the epithets that qualify them and the verbs that describe their attitude and behaviour. We shall then discuss the cry of the oppressed.

Those who are high-handed in the Psalmist's society are referred to by various designations and the frequency of occurrence of those designations tells us something:

Man of violence(s) – *'is ḥamāsīm*: 3 times (vv. 2b, 5b, 12b)

Wicked man – *rāsā'*: 2 times (5a, 9a)

Evil man – *'ādām rā'*: once (2a)

Arrogant – *gē'īm*: once (6a)

Corrupt – *'ḥabālīm*: once (6b)

Man of tongue – *'is lāsôn*: once (12a)

It is evident that the antagonists of the psalmist are known for their violence and wickedness. Besides, they are arrogant and corrupt, and they use their tongue with great cunning — hence they are designated as "men of tongue". They are named at the very outset with one generic name as "evil men" (v. 2a).

Some of their bodily organs are mentioned in connection with the function to which they are put: their heart, in which evils are planned (v. 3); their tongue which is sharpened¹⁵ in order to

One cannot prove also that controversies between the religious parties of later Judaism form the background. The opposition between the godly and the wicked is one that was found from the early times of Israel's history. Cf Weiser, A., *The Psalms* (OTL, SCM Press Ltd., London, 1965,) p. 809

13. Kirkpatrick, A. F., op. cit. cf. pp 792-3.

14. Clarke, A. G., *Analytical Studies in the Psalms* (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983), cf. p. 343. See discussion on different literary structures, in Ravasi, G., op. cit. pp. 834-5. Aletti, J. N.- Trublet, J., op. cit. p.27, analyze Ps. 140 into two parts as: 1) Seven projects of the wicked (vv. 2-6), and 2) Seven wishes against the wicked (vv. 7-14). They see numerical balance of poetical elements.

15. The verb, used for sharpening *sānanū*, is derived from the root *sen*, meaning "tooth"; allusion to the teeth is implicit, cf. Dahood, M., *Psalms III*, p. 301. Thus tongue, teeth and lips make the whole mouth and symbolize the speech with which the psalmist is attacked.

attack (v. 4,12); their lips, under which there is a stock of viper's venom (vv. 4,10); their hands, which symbolize oppressive power (v. 5).

The psalmist refers to two of his bodily members which are the targets of the enemy's attack: his feet, which the adversaries plan to trip up (v. 5c), and his head, which he asks Yahweh to shelter (v. 8b). By mentioning his feet and head — forming an inclusion by means of polar terms —, he has effectively conveyed that his whole self is under the attack of wicked men. Another of his faculties, his voice — he uses to call for God's intervention.

The verbs which express the conduct of the enemies are significant: They plan (*hāsāb*) evil things (v. 3a); they conspire (*gār*) warfare (v. 3b); they sharpen (*sānān*) for a venomous attack (v. 4a); they plan to trip up (*dāḥāh*) the victim's feet (v.5c); they have hidden (*tāman*) a trap, spread out (*paras*) a net and set (*sīt*) snares for the psalmist (v.6); They surround (*sabab*) the innocent with mischief (v. 10).

The poet has reinforced the actions of the verbs with powerful similes, metaphors and imagery. He has employed three sets of images: One is theriomorphic imagery: the serpent and its tongue (vv. 4a, 12a)¹⁶ and the viper with its venom (vv. 4b, 10b)¹⁷; the second one is a hunter-imagery: "to trip up my feet" is a generic expression to make someone stumble and fall (cf. Ps: 35:5; Prov. 14:32; Ps. 62:4); it is specified by the expressions "hidden a trap", "spread out a net", and "set snares", — all these phrases depict a hunting scene. The third imagery is of military action: warfare (v. 3b) and the day of battle (v. 8b) — the attack is the climax of enemy's action.

The malice and violence of the oppressors will be seen better by collocating other similar texts of the Bible which reflect directly or indirectly the social and ethical situation. Thus a more accurate knowledge of the attitude and behaviour of the antagonists of the psalmist will be obtained.

Analysis of the occurrences of *ra'* shows¹⁸, that the term is parallel to *resa'im* (4 times)=wicked, unjust, and to *'ara'im* (once)

16. Verse 12a by way of envelope figure corresponds to v. 4a. The linking element is the tongue. Likewise v. 12b corresponds to vv. 5c-6. The expression "May Evil hunt him" evokes the whole scene of vv. 5c-6.

17. V. 4b "venom under lips" is enveloped by "poison of their lips" in 10b.

18. The epithet *rā'* is used along with 'ś in 1 Sam. 30:22 and with 'ādām here

=ruthless. It is antithetic to *ṣaddiqīm* (3 times) = just, and to *ṭōbīm* (twice) = good. In Ps. 140, *ra'* is parallel to "man of violences" (v. 2) and is substituted by *rasa'* in v.5. The persons designated by this noun are counted among the rebellious (Jer. 6:29), and are extremely proud (Job. 35:12; cf. Ps. 140:6). They are cunning in using their lips, i. e., words (Prov. 12:13; comp. Ps. 140:4, 10, 12).

In the phrase "man of violence" — *'is ḥamas*, the noun *ḥamas* deserves our attention¹⁹. What is important here is to define the comprehension of the noun. The word is used as parallel to *rīb* = strife (Ps. 55:10), *'amal* = mischief (Pss. 7:17, comp. 140:10), *ga'awah* = pride (Ps. 73:6, cf. 140:6) *tōk* = oppression (Ps. 72:14)²⁰. Violence is committed by treacherous people (Prov. 13:2) and is concealed in their mouth (Prov. 10:6-11; comp. Ps. 140:4). By bearing false witness, violence is perpetrated (Pss. 27:12; 35:11; Dt. 19:16). Violence characterizes hatred (Ps. 25:19) and deeds of injustice are devised in the heart and executed by hands (Pss. 58:3; comp. 140:3). The speaker of Ps. 74:20 complains that violence has found habitation all over the land²¹.

The occurrences of *rasa'* in the Bible are too numerous for an exhaustive survey here. The following collocation, however, is revealing: The word occurs as parallel to: lover of violence (Ps. 11:5), enemy (Ps. 3:8), sinners and scoffers (Ps. 1:1), evil-doers (Pss. 26:5; 101:8), those who forsake the Law (Ps. 119:53) etc. It stands in antithetic parallelism with: just (Ps. 7:10; Prov. 12:26; 18:5 [*ṣaddiq*] Ps. 1:6; Prov. 3:33; 10:3 [*ṣaddiqīm*]) he who pursues righteousness (Prov. 15:9; 25:5), the upright (Prov. 21:29), those who love God (Pss. 37:28; 145:20), he who trusts in

in v.2. In the former, *ra'* is in Parallelism with *bel'yyā'āl* (=worthless), while in our psalm, with "man of violences". The word is used as noun in: Ps. 10:15; Job. 21:30; Prov. 11:21; 12:13; 24:20 (*ra'*); Jer. 6:29; 15:21; Ez. 30:12 Job. 35:12; Prov. 4:14; 12:12; 14:19; 15:3 (*ra'im*).

19. The phrase "man of violences" (pl) occurs in 2 Sam. 22:49 in David's song of deliverance and in Ps. 140:2,5, "man of violence" (sing) in Ps. 18:49 = 2 Sam. 22:49; Prov. 3:31; 16:29 and in Ps. 140:12.

20. In Prov. 4:17 *yāyin ḥamāsīm* = wine of violences, is paralleled by *lehem resa'* = bread of wickedness.

21. This behaviour is confirmed by the prophets: e.g. Am. 3:10 (in Samaria); Jer. 6:7; Mic. 6:12; Zeph. 1:9 (in Judah and Jerusalem)

the Lord (Ps. 32:10), the sojourners, the widow, the fatherless (Ps. 146:9) etc.

The attitude and conduct of the wicked are sufficiently described in the Psalter itself. The *resa'im* (the wicked) practise violence against the weak (Pss. 11:5; 18:49; 25:19; 27:12; 72:14; 86:14; esp. 140:2,5,12); they exploit the orphan (Pss. 10:14-15; 82:3-4; 94:3,6; 146:9) and the widow (Pss. 94:3, 6; 146:9); they are bloodthirsty (Pss. 5:7; 26:9; 51:16; 55:24; 59:3; 72:14; 94:21; 119:19), oppressors (62:11; 72:4; 73:8; 119:121, 122, 134; 146:7), exploiters (35:10); they are cunning (10:7; 72:14); they tell lies to their neighbour (12:3; 24:4; 26:4; 41:7; 144:8,11) and deceive him (5:7; 40:5; 58:4; 62:5) through fraud and trickery (5:7; 10:7; 24:4; 35:20; 36:4; 43:1; 50:19; 52:6; 55:24; 109:2); they accept bribes (26:10); they do not pay back what they borrow (37:21); they are unmerciful to the extreme (12:1; 43:1; 109:16); they practise injustice (37:1; 43:1; 64:7; 89:23; 107:42; 125:3). From Pss. 1,7,9,37,58,64,72,82,94 etc., it is evident that *resa'im* is the opposite of *saddiqim*, and must be understood as "unjust" in its strongest sense²². In brief, *rasa'* is a person for whom the divine law has no existential significance, so that his sin is not simply his *actus peccandi*, but embraces his life as such²³.

In our Psalm, the description of the evil man (v. 2), the man of violence (vv. 2:5-12), the wicked (v. 5), and the man of tongue (v. 12) squares perfectly with the foregoing one. The oppressors in the Psalm are arrogant presumptuous and corrupt (v. 6). They plan evil things in their heart and are conspiring troubles and clashes (v. 3 cf. 55:22). They use their tongue extremely cleverly and their malicious slander is as deadly as the viper's venom. For they strive to accomplish their purpose by craft, with the subtlety and venom of a serpent (v. 4 cf. also 52:4; 55:22; 57:5; 58:5; 64:4). The insidiousness of a shrewd hunter is only a feeble example for their enslaving efforts by which the innocent are trapped (vv. 5-6: comp. Pss. 9:16; 31:5; 35:7-8; 64:6; 141:9; 142:4).

22. Miranda, J. P., *Marx and the Bible*, Trans. Eagleson, J., (SCM Press Ltd, London, 1982), pp. 95-106. The author has made clear that *resa'im* and *saddiqim* should be understood in reference to social justice. Proverbs and the prophets are in agreement, e.g. Prov. 17:23; 19:28; 28:4, 5:15 etc. Is. 13:11; Mic. 6:10.

23. Anderson, A.A., *op. cit.* p. 914

The concrete situation that is reflected in Ps. 140, is a society in which the rich and influential persons could easily manipulate the social and political machineries in such a way as to frighten, exploit and oppress the poor, innocent and helpless sections of the ordinary people. The psalmist represents this section of the people and cries out to God in their name.

The cry of the oppressed

The cry of the victims comes in the psalm at three stages: It opens up the lament in general terms (v. 2). This is followed by the description of the enemies in the imagery of serpents (v. 4). The cry is repeated (v. 5) and then comes another description of the adversaries in the imagery of hunting (v. 6). The third cry is for divine protection and it is more formal and formulaic (vv. 7-9). Picking up the battle-imagery of v. 3b, the psalmist affirms unambiguously and appeals earnestly to the covenant-commitment of Yahweh, in terms of military intervention and defence²⁴. By virtue of the covenant commitment, the enemies of the psalmist have become automatically the adversaries of God and so God is bound to intervene in his favour (cf. Pss. 28:2-6; 31:23; 116:1; 130:2). The expressions used in relation to the liberative or defensive operation of God are of military imagery: *halaš* is a military term²⁵. It is used in military context in Ps. 34:8. Certainly it forms a poignant cry in time of distress and affliction (Pss. 50:15; 81:8; 119:153) and a prayer for deliverance (Pss. 25:20; 81:8; 91:15). Particularly graphical is its use in Ps. 116:8. The two verbs *nāšār* and *samar* signify "protective watchfulness" like a bodyguard (comp. 1 Sam. 28:2 as well as 1 Sam. 17:38). These two verbs appear as parallels in Pss. 12:8; 140:5 141:3²⁶. The verb *sakak* means "to cover or shelter" in such a way that there is no possibility of

24. Besides the invocation of the Covenant-God by His proper name Yahweh (vv. 2, 5, 7, 8, 9 – six times in the cry for deliverance and protection and once v. 13 in the prayer for a change of situation), there is the strong expression of covenant relationship and commitment in "My God you are" in v. 7. Consider also the accent on possessive pronoun: *my God, my voice, my Lord, my safety, my head*.

25. In Piel the verb signifies 'to rescue'. It is found as parallel to *yasa'* in Hiph. (Ps. 6:5), to *yasa'* in Hiph. (Ps. 18:20) to *samar* (Ps. 25:20)

26. *Nāšār* is parallel to *pālāz* — deliver in Ps. 32:7, *Nasar* occurs in Pss. 25:21, 31:24; 40:12; 61:8; 64:2, meaning "preserve, protect". The use of this verb in Dt. 32:10 is quite picturesque.

an attack.²⁷ In the psalm the explicit reference to battle context – “fortress (*‘ôz*) of my safety” and “day of battle (*naseq*)” – in v. 8, implies that in the day of battle, Yahweh is the helmet of the psalmist! (comp. Ps. 18:35-36)

“Give ear to my voice of supplication” is the cry of the oppressed which reaches the throne of God and His ears²⁸. The cry is a kind of protest by the psalmist against silence, indifference and inaction of God. The insistence and urgency of the cry is poetically brought out by the correspondence of God’s ears — in *ha’azinah* in v.8 — and the psalmist’s voice (*qôl*). This intensive cry of the psalmist is certainly parallel to and a repetition of all the cries of the oppressed of the past that urged God to intervene in history and deliver them²⁹. Thus as the representative of all the oppressed and afflicted of his society, the psalmist takes ultimate refuge in Yahweh, like a king whose last resort of safety is his fortress (cf. Pss. 9:10; 18:3; 27:1; 28:8; 31:3-5; 46; 2-8,12). From within the Yahweh-Fortress, like a child he expresses his fear and anxiety in the form of a petition: First, he prays God not to grant the desires of the wicked (v. 9a), and secondly, not to promote or support their evil designs (v. 9b). Their desires and designs³⁰ have already been mentioned by him in vv. 3:5c.

Prayer for a just retribution and a change in situation

The psalmist formulates this prayer (vv. 10-12) in the form of “imprecations” or “a prayer for vengeance”. Moralistic disquietudes may be aroused by these verses³¹. But this prayer simply

27. The verb occurs also in Pss. 5:12; 91:4; 139:13, of which the latter two form strong imagery.

28. For other instances of this phrase *qôl tahanûni* or *qôli tahanuni* in similar context, see Pss. 86:6; 116:1; 130:2. In all these three places, the denominative verb *‘āzan* is used.

29. Miranda, J. P., op.cit. pp. 88ff where he refers to many occasions of Israelite history in which God’s intervention is called for by such cries. Pertinent to our study are Pss. 9:13; 34:18; 77:2; 88:2; 107:6,28.

30. The Hebrew words here used for “the desires” *m’awayye* and “design” *zāmām* are both hapax legomena. See, Dahood, M., *Psalms III*, p. 303; Ravasi, G., op. cit. pp. 839-40.

31. The imprecations found here and in some other psalms have been very badly misunderstood by the majority of “pious” Christians. The positive value of these imprecations has been shown with many examples by Luke, K., “Imprecations in the Psalms: their Positive Value”, *Jeevadhara II*, 8 (March-

signifies that "punishment is wrested from the hands of man and is entirely entrusted to God, to whom it is left to exterminate the wicked completely"³². The psalmist only prays that just retribution may overtake his enemies and their conduct may be required. Underlying these imprecations are two legal principles that are correlative: 1) Commensurate or proportionate sanction should be inflicted on the offender of a law 2) The sanction should not exceed the strict limits or norms of equity and justice. The famous "lex talionis" – tit for tat – is based on both these legal principles simultaneously.

Another legal principle behind the imprecations is that a slanderer or unjust accuser must receive the punishment that would have befallen the accused if he were found guilty³³. This last principle is the one which inspired the first imprecation of the psalmist: If there is viper's venom stored up under the lips of the wicked (v. 4b), let it flood and drown their very selves! (v. 10)³⁴ Prayers for similar retribution are found in Pss. 5:11; 7:16-17; 9:16-17; 10:2; 59:13; 109:6-19; 141:10; cf. 137:8-9.

The imprecation in v.11 contains two clear allusions to biblical events³⁵. By allusively sanctioning the punishment and fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, the psalmist equates his enemies and their crimes to the men and their sins of those accursed cities. The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah was great and their sin was very grave. Hence Yahweh decided "to do justice

April, 1972), 132-148 with bibliography. One can say that the imprecations in the psalms are simply the negative formulations of beatitudes! Compare Lk. 6:20-22. 24-26. I dare even call them blessings provided they are understood in the proper perspective.

32. Weiser, A., op. cit. p. 432

33. Luke K., art. cit. pp. 143-145, with materials from the Code of Hammurabi and the Psalter.

34. The verb *kasah* means "overwhelm and drown": comp. Ex. 14:28; 15:5, 10; Jos. 24:7; Pss. 78:53; 106:11 = the sea covering the Egyptians; cf. also Ps. 104:9; Jer. 46:8; Ez. 26:19; Job. 22:11; 38:34.

35. Ravasi, G., p. 841: (a) There may be an allusion to a sort of theophany accompanied by lightning, fire and hailstones as in e.g. Jos. 10:11; Judg. chs. 4-5, comp. Pss. 11:6; 120:4. (b) More clear is the allusion to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Gen. 19:24-28; comp. Gen. 18:7-16. (c) There is certainly in 11b an allusion to Sheol or Hell: comp. Pss. 9:18; 88:11ff; cf. Is. 14:15ff; Ez. 26:20; 32:17-20; Sir. 12:16; Job. 15:30; 20:26. (d) The last punishment in 11c is "stylized" after the example of Num. 16: 31-34 the punishment that was meted out to Korah, Dathan and Abiram,

(*sedaqah*) and right (*mispat*)" (Gen. 18-19). Yahweh carries out this justice and right by exterminating the criminals (Gen. 19:24f). This is "the way of the Lord" (Gen. 18:19). For, Yahweh is the God who intervenes in history to destroy the unjust and to deliver the oppressed from the injustice which they suffer³⁶. In the following sentences, the imagery of Sheol is combined with an allusion to the fate of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. The way of the Lord in this episode was to do justice and right by splitting asunder the ground under the feet of the rabble, burying them alive into the Sheol (Num. 16:31-32) and consuming their supporters by fire that "came forth from the Lord" (Num. 16:35). This is the type of saving "judgment" (*mispat*) which the psalmist prays Yahweh to execute on his enemies³⁷. In the formulation of this imprecation, the climactic process is maintained: burning coals being heaped upon the wicked: the wicked being cast into the Fire and that irreversibly³⁸.

While the previous imprecations were figuratively formulated, the last one in v. 12, is more concrete and definitive. The psalmist pronounces the curse in two parts: 1) Let not the man of the tongue (v. 4) be established in the land. In other words, the slanderer should not take roots or find stability in the Promised Land. Nor should the patriarchal promise be fulfilled in his case (comp. Pss. 35:5-6; 101:5; 109; cf. Prov. 13:21; 21:28; 30:10). The primary significance of the verb *kān* in Niph. is "to be firmly fixed", "to be stable" (cf. 2 Sam. 7:16; Pss. 101:7; 102:29; Prov. 12:3; 16:3; 20:18; Job. 21:8). The psalmist, in effect, prays that the wicked may radically be exterminated from the Land of the Lord. Probably there is here a reference to the general principle of the ritual law (cf. Ex. 20:12 and Dt. 5:16) according to which the rite of the divine judgment eliminated the wicked from the cult community and consequently also from the right of possessing property in the Land³⁹. 2) "Let Evil hunt the man of violence

36. Cf. Miranda, J. P., op. cit. pp. 96ff.

37. It is interesting to note a certain literary parallelism between Gen. chs. 18-19 and Num. 16, e.g. Compare Num. 16:21 with Gen. 18:20-21; Num. 16:22 with Gen. 18:23ff; Num. 16:23-27 with Gen. 19:12-22a; Num. 16:31-35 with Gen. 19:24-28. Above all, both episodes illustrate Yahweh's judgment on the wicked, which is at the same time a saving intervention.

38. Dahood, M., *Psalms III*, p. 305, following Briggs, C. A., op. cit. p. 505, sees in 11c a denial of resurrection to the wicked, cf. Pss. 1:5; 36:13.

39. Weiser, A., op. cit. cf. p. 810. According to Dt. 31:9ff a redistribution of the

(vv. 2:5) into banishment!⁴⁰ Evil is personified here as a hunter who doggedly pursues his game. The verb *šad* means precisely "to hunt" (Gen. 27:3; cf. Lam. 3:52; Mic. 7:2; Jer. 16:16). Certainly the "lex talionis" is invoked again, and consequently the hunters become the hunted by their own Chief — Evil, whose agents they were (comp. Pss. 18:6; 42:7; 116:3; 141:10; 142:7; 143:3)⁴¹. The chase by Evil will ultimately drive the oppressors into banishment⁴¹. The psalmist wishes that the wicked be banished out of the Land (cf. Ps. 35:6). In v. 12 he gathers all types of evil men by arching them with the phrases "man of the tongue" (v. 4) and "man of violence (vv. 2:5)" and sends them once for all into exile. The imprecations are construed like three deadly strokes: drowning, (v. 10b); casting unretrievably into the deep Pit (v. 11a); and banishment (v. 12b). Complete banishment or even annihilation of the evil is the result of God's intervention.

The changed situation

The last two verses of the psalm contain the psalmist's profession of faith and his act of confidence. Expressions of faith and confidence are intimately connected with and invariably accompany the elements of misery and suffering in psalms of lament. They must be taken into consideration together; otherwise the lament will inevitably give a false impression⁴². These lines express the positive result that is expected, the situation that will ensue from Yahweh's historic intervention and the final destiny of the friends of God. After a long suspension, the identity of the protagonists of the psalm is revealed in these lines.

The declaration of the psalmist's unshakable conviction starts with v. 13: "I know". The *yada'ti* is a parallel to the *'amarti* of v. 7, and both are verbs of confession. What the psalmist said

land "was carried out every seven years in the autumn within the framework of the Covenant Festival and presumably followed the tradition of the conquest and distribution of the land", *ibid.* p. 44. This idea may underlie Pss. 16:5-6; 25:13; 37:9, 11; 60:8ff; 61:6 etc. The regulation for celebrating the Jubilee Year, Lev. 25 may be profitably recalled here.

40. Dahood, M., *Psalms III*, p. 306 renders *ra'as* "the Evil One" and understands it as Death the Hunter.

41. The root verb *dāḥāp* from which the hapax *madḥepot* is derived signifies "to drive, to thrust".

42. Worden, T., *The Psalms are Christian Prayer* (Geoffrey Chapman, London 1967), pp. 47f.

above, "My God you are!", he now knows for certain and proclaims as certain. He declares that Yahweh shall maintain the cause (*din*) of the oppressed (*'ani*) and the right (*mispat*) of the poor (*'ebyonim*). The semantic study of the four key terms *din* // *mispat* and *'ani* // *'ebyonim* is too ambitious here⁴³. The term *din* means the cause or plea of an oppressed person⁴⁴. *Mispat* has the meaning of "legal right", "due", which has been violated by the high-handed⁴⁵. This word is intimately connected with the notion of social justice and liberation. The psalmist is convinced that Yahweh will powerfully intervene in history to execute justice, and His intervention will naturally involve retribution to the wicked and re-establishment of the oppressed and the poor in their rights (cf. Pss. 7:8-9; 9:5; 12:6; 22:25; 35:10; 40:18; 86:1ff). The oppressed and the poor in v. 13 are qualitative representatives of all those who suffer social injustice, exploitation, discrimination etc...⁴⁶.

The emphatic "surely" initiates the act of confidence⁴⁷, which is parallel to the "I know" of v. 13. Verse 14 describes the

43. Literature on these words and themes are quite large. To cite a couple of them: Guillet, J., *Themes of the Bible*, Trans. La Mothe' A. J., (Fides Publishers, 1964), pp. 20-95; Gelin, A., *The Poor of Yahweh*, Trans. Kathryn Sullivan (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1964); Miranda, J. P., op. cit. pp. 75-199 with ample bibliography in the notes and on pp. 301-312.

44. The primary meaning of *din* is judgment passed by the judge: e. g. Ps. 76:9; Prov. 20:8; Job. 36:17. According to A. Feuillet, judgment in the biblical tradition is "the divine intermediary act which assures the passing of the present time and the present world — which is evil — into the age of salvation", *RB* (1949), 81-82, cited in Guillet, J., op. cit. p. 95, note 194. More commonly *din* means "a plea, a cause", e.g. Dt. 17:8; Jer. 22:16. It occurs as parallel to *mispat*, in Ps. 140:13; Jer. 5:28; Job. 36:17. In Jer. 5:28 *'ebyônîm* is parallel to *yatôm* = fatherless; *dîn 'nî* occurs also in Jer. 22:16 (where *anî* is parallel to *'ebyôn*). This phrase is to be correlated with *dîn dallim* needy, Is. 10:2; *dîn yatom*, Jer. 5:28 *'ašah dîn* is found in Pss. 9:5; 140:13; *'ašah mispat* occurs in Jer. 22:15, where *mispat* is parallel to *šedaqah*.

45. See the previous note for parallels. *din*, *mispat* and *šedaqah* are synonyms cf. Dt. 10:18; Ex. 23:6; Jer. 5:28; Is. 10:2; Job. 36:6; Ps. 140:13. For a detailed study of *mispat*, see Miranda, J. P. op. cit. pp. 109-199.

46. See note 44: *anî*, *'ebyônîm*, *dallîm* are all synonyms. Widows, orphans, and sojourners are some concrete examples among the poor, needy etc. cf. Pss. 10, 82, 94 passim. All these categories are eventually identified with the *šaddîqîm* and *yesarîm* of v. 14.

47. The particle *'aka* is asseverative, stronger than *kî* = indeed, and introduces with emphasis the expression of a truth.

changed situation after the intervention of Yahweh. The mystery of lawlessness has come to a definitive end and the poor and the afflicted have found their full deliverance and security. Naturally there is praise and worship without end; and the just and the upright will be at home in the presence of Yahweh⁴⁸. The just and the upright are none but the oppressed and the poor of v. 13. They were oppressed by the wicked, and consequently rendered poor by their exploitation, but now when Yahweh maintains their cause and upholds their right, they are proved just and upright. *Ṣaddîq* means one who has been, by God's historical intervention, vindicated and upheld as just (comp. Is. 53:11; 60:21; Pss. 1,9,37; 68,82 - passim). The word is synonymous with *yasar* (comp. Pss. 32:11; 64:11; 97:11)⁴⁹. *Yesarem* refers to the godly and is parallel to *ṣaddîqîm* (cf. Pss. 33:1; 49:15; 107:42; 111:1; 112:2-4) and to *naqi* = innocent (cf. Job. 4:7; 17:8). The upright are very dear to Yahweh (cf. Prov. 3:32; 14:9; 15:8). The just who have been delivered from the wicked give thanks (*yadah*) to Yahweh — the Name stands for the Person (cf. Pss. 44:9; 54:8; 99:3; 106:47; 122:4; 138:2; Is. 25:1).

The redeemed of Yahweh have a right to dwell in His house, witness His theophany and to be His guests! (comp. Pss. 11:7; 15:1; 23:6; 27:4; 61:8; 84:5; 134:1; 135:1-3) The phrase, "before your face", probably refers to the cultic context of a ritual worship in the temple (cf. Pss. 106:47; 122:4), and to Yahweh's theophany in the cult. Such theophany of Yahweh is security and happiness to the just and upright. The psalmist has poetically arched the whole transformation by the mentioning of Yahweh's ears which hear his prayer and His face which reveals His grace.

A dalit prays for social change

The outcry of the psalmist is not some lone lament of the remote past nor one of someone in a distant country. It is, in effect, the cry of anguish for deliverance and justice by a dalit in Indian society.

The violences, oppressions and exploitations committed against the dalits in India are equally bad — if not much worse and more inhuman than those against the psalmist. Here below

48. Cf. Gaebelein, A. C., *The Book of Psalms* (Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune New Jersey, 1978), pp. 486-7.

49. See further, Miranda, J. P., op. cit. pp. 97ff.

is the testimony of no less a person than the Chairman of the CBCI Commission for SC/ST and BC⁵⁰:

"Statistically, the SC (i.e., the dalits) population figure is 104,754,623 representing 15.75% of the total population in India, with 84% of the SC population living in rural areas and 16% in urban areas.

"A review of the available atrocity data against Scheduled Castes, for the year 1982 to 84 presents a somewhat disturbing trend: the overall number of cases of atrocity against the SCs that had declined from 15051 in 1982 to 14487 in 1983 recorded an increase to 16586 in 1984. It is still on the increase⁵¹.

"The situation of the Scheduled Castes is the result of endemic exploitation and deprivation, and structural and organized inequality in its extreme form, over several centuries in our country, particularly in rural society and economy..."

A dalit in India is raising his "voice of supplication" through Ps. 140 to Yahweh, the Lord of history to intervene powerfully and exterminate completely the wicked discriminators and exploiters, and eventually bring about a society where the cause of the oppressed will be maintained, the right of the poor will be upheld, and the just and upright will enjoy peace, security and God's intimacy on the basis of universal brother/sisterhood and of God's mother/fatherhood.

Ps. 140 in the mouth of a christian dalit

The living conditions and treatment of the Christian dalits are much more miserable than those of their non-Christian counterparts. Here is again a summary: The practice of caste, so repugnant to our moral and social sense does continue even after conversion. The disabilities also persist with the same oppressive

50. For all practical purposes, the dalits may be equated with the SCs and to some extent, with STs. The BCs need not be dalits. The citation is from the Main Paper on "Caste and Conversion" in the Documentation Section of *Report of the General Meeting of the CBCI*: Shillong, November 1989, pp. 40-53. The paper was read by Most Rev. Dr. M. Arockiasamy, the Archbishop of Madurai

51. Let us remember that in cases of atrocity, the official statistics, provided by the government are almost always lower than the factual ones. The cases of atrocity are in reality much more numerous. One may recall here such incidents as the one of Tsundur in Andra.

severity. "Every convert to Catholicism hoped for a status of equality with his fellowmen. But the structured inequalities practised in Hinduism were reflected and carried willingly to the new faith..."

The Christian dalits "suffer fivefold discrimination: discrimination by the caste Christian community, discrimination by the hierarchical Church, discrimination by the government, discrimination by the upper castes in the Hindu fold and even discrimination by the fellow Hindu SCs... The Church hierarchy ignores their (namely of the Pulayas in certain dioceses of Central and South Kerala) very existence"⁵².

A Christian dalit can fittingly and poignantly pray Ps.140, and when he so prays, the identification of the evil men, men of violence, men of tongue etc., will include most of us — if not all of us — the non-dalit Christians! The naked truth is that the rule of Yahweh has yet to come even amidst the Christians!

Conclusion

The outcry of the oppressed and poor, repeated in our country and in our times by the dalits, urges God to intervene effectively in history and change the society. God's intervention, however, must not be conceived as something purely apocalyptic or commotional. It is through the agency of human beings, like Moses in the OT that God intervenes, enters history and brings about radical and even structural change in the society. Therefore it is the duty of everyone who is challenged by the present situation in India whether dalits or non-dalits, to work effectively for a change. No one can plead ignorance or inability — all the more, those who are leaders endowed with either religious or political powers. In this case even silence or indifference is as grievous as the crime of oppression itself.

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52. CBCI Report, op. cit., pp. 52-53, with documentation. The present writer knows and has even witnessed cases where the reasonable reactions or just demands of the Christian dalits through peaceful agitations or representations were ridiculed or banned and even ruthlessly repressed by some high-handed members of Church hierarchy!

The Table Fellowship of Jesus

Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today

A recent study on Jesus describes his table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners as "one of the most conspicuous and controversial aspects of the renewal movement founded by him"¹. This echoes a long standing consensus among scholars, all or nearly all of whom agree on the great importance of such table fellowship, even though they do not all explain its importance in the same way². Eating with outcasts, says Guenther Bornkamm in his classic work on Jesus of Nazareth, was "really the astonishing thing at which his enemies murmur"³. It was the one feature of his life, thinks Geza Vermes, in his study of Jesus the Jew, in which Jesus differed most from both his contemporaries

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- 1 Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness & Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (NY: Mellen, 1984)
 - 2 While most authors interpret the tax collectors and sinners with whom Jesus associates as religious outcasts, who are not admitted to table fellowship by the pious because [they are 'unclean', E. P. Sanders, in *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985) 174-211, questions this, on the grounds that "sinners" are not those who are ritually unclean but those who have violated the covenant. Ritual uncleanness does not, he argues, make someone a sinner. But Sanders, I feel, fails to take into account the importance of purity and pollution in traditional societies, like post-exilic Judaism (or traditional India), in which the popular perception of purity and pollution may go well beyond the strictly juridical. What begins as merely cultic incompetence (this is how Sanders interprets pollution in the new Testament) soon becomes "social uncleanness" with moral overtones -- cf. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah Before 70* [Brown, Judaic Studies, 1] (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 289. Had Sanders experienced the working of caste in India, he might not so easily have dismissed the significance of purity/pollution in the table fellowship of Jesus.
 - 3 Guenther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper, 1960) 80

and his prophetic predecessors. "The prophets", he says, "spoke on behalf of the honest poor, and defended the widows and the fatherless, those oppressed and exploited by the wicked, rich and powerful. Jesus went further. In addition to proclaiming these blessed, he actually took his stand among the pariahs of his world, those despised by the respectable. Sinners were his table companions and the ostracised tax-collectors and prostitutes his friends".⁴ And Norman Perrin sees in such "regular table fellowship in the name of the Kingdom of God" between Jesus and the outcast Jews, a decisive factor which led to his violent death⁵.

Why is it that scholars give such importance to what would seem to us no more than mildly scandalous behaviour on the part of a would be 'holy man'? One reason for this is that intensive sociological and anthropological studies of first century Palestine have taught us that in the social world of Jesus (so very different from the egalitarian, permissive post-modern society in which most of us live), a seemingly harmless practice like dining with outcasts would have been (as it would be in rural India today) an extraordinarily revolutionary act, fraught with radical consequences, and holding important lessons for us who wish to follow Jesus in India today. In this article, which offers a reflection on what the Jesus of the gospels has to say about the situation of the dalits in our country and in our church we need, then, to understand 1) what this revolutionary praxis of Jesus (his table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners) meant in the social world in which he lived; and 2) what it has to tell us about our own attitudes towards dalit Christians in the caste-ridden communities we live in.

A. The Table Fellowship of Jesus

1. The gospel picture

The Synoptic Gospels, which are our primary source for learning about the Jesus of history (that is, Jesus as he actually lived in an obscure Roman colony in Western Asia, nearly two thousand years ago), contain many references to Jesus dining with tax-collectors and sinners.

4 Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1973) 224

5 Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1967) 102-105

1) Mark shows us Jesus sitting at table with tax collectors and sinners at the house of Levi, the tax collector whom he has just called to follow him. His table fellowship is resented by the purity-conscious religious leaders of his people ("the teachers of the law who were Pharisees"), and they question his disciples: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mk 2:15f=Mt 9:10f=Lk 5:29-30).

2) A related Q saying (Mt 11:16-19=Lk 7:31-35) shows Jesus complaining that his listeners are like discontented children playing at weddings or at funerals ("we played the flute for you and you did not dance, we wailed and you did not mourn"). They find fault with the Baptist for his asceticism and with Jesus for his association with the disreputable: "John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'" (Mt 11:18f). Jesus thus reports two related accusations made against him by his contemporaries ("this generation"). Unlike John, he does not lead the kind of ascetical life that befits a 'holy man'; and worse still, he dines with 'tax collectors and sinners'.

3) The same accusation ("This man welcomes sinners and eats with them") is used by Luke (15:1f) to provide an introductory setting to his three parables of mercy (the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son), which offer a significant theological comment on this praxis of Jesus (Lk 15:3-31). In a modified form ("he has gone to be the guest of a sinner") it interprets the story of the tax collector Zaccheus (Lk 19:7), making it into a story which shows how "the Son of Man comes to seek and save what was lost" (Lk 19:7-10).

4) Jesus refers to the charge of his association with "tax collectors and sinners" in several of his parables and sayings. In these he does not deny the fact of such table fellowship, but justifies it on several grounds:

a) The religious and social outcasts with whom he associates, Jesus points out, have not ceased to be part of God's people (Lk 19:9), nor the objects of God's loving concern (Lk 15:3-31). They must therefore be the object, indeed the special object, of his own mission too. "It is not the healthy that need the doctor", says Jesus, "but the sick" (Mk 2:17).

b) Indeed, because of their readiness to repent, shown by their prompt acceptance of the teaching of John the Baptist (and eventually of Jesus himself), such 'outcasts' are more open to the eschatological salvation he offers than are the religious elite. "Tax collectors and prostitutes (dalits)", Jesus tells the religious leaders of the Jews (as he might well tell priests, religious, bishops and 'respectable' lay people in the Indian church today), "are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Mt 21:31-32).

c) The ultimate reason for this is that the proper religious attitude which justifies a person (puts him or her into a right relationship with God) is not the reliance on one's own merits shown by the Pharisee in Luke's familiar parable of the Pharisee and Tax collector at prayer (Lk 18:9-14); but the readiness to trust in God's forgiveness shown by the tax collector. It is precisely this attitude of openness to conversion, which Jesus finds in the 'tax collectors and sinners' (but not in their counterparts the learned scribes and righteous Pharisees!), that justifies his table fellowship with them. As Joachim Jeremias sums it up, Jesus gives us three reasons for vindicating his proclamation of good news to the poor: 1) the need and the openness of 'sinners'; 2) the self-assured religiosity of the righteous; and 3) most of all, the compassion of a loving God⁶.

It is quite certain, then, that Jesus did habitually dine with the religious and social outcasts of his society, even though this behaviour of his aroused sharp and sustained criticism from the religious elite. References to such table fellowship are found in all the commonly recognized strands of the Synoptic tradition, in Mk (2:16-17), in Q (Mt 11:16-19=Lk 7:31-35) and in the special material of Luke (15:1f) and Matthew (21:31f). Such widespread reference to a subject which must have been a cause of considerable embarrassment to his first followers suggests that Jesus' table fellowship with the outcasts was not only a well known, historically certain feature of his ministry, but a highly significant feature as well. What, then, did such table fellowship signify?

The gospels (possibly echoing Jesus himself) explain it in

6 Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology, Volume One: The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971) 119-20

terms of pastoral concern. Through his table fellowship with 'tax collectors and sinners' Jesus reaches out to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 15:24), in order to bring them back to the fold. He goes to those who are in need of a physician (Mk 2:16); he seeks and saves the lost (Lk 19:7). His table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners is, as it were, the spiritual counterpart of his healing of the disabled and the sick. But such pastoral concern does not adequately explain the importance given by the tradition to this particular 'deviant' behaviour of Jesus; nor does it account for the immense hostility it aroused. Like his miracles (which are not just works of individual healing but signs of a radical structural change which put Satan's rule to an end, and ushered in a new cosmic and social order, God's rule),⁷ the table fellowship of Jesus is more than a form of individual pastoral care. It is the expression of a radically new (and therefore thoroughly disturbing) theological vision, rooted in a new experience of God, and calling for a new kind of society.

2. The Jewish background

a) The meal as an expression of fellowship

The theological vision implicit in the table fellowship of Jesus is intelligible only if we locate this table fellowship in the social world in which he lived. In this world the sharing of a meal was a sign of intimacy, communion and fellowship. "Sharing a table", as Joachim Jeremias puts it, "meant sharing life"⁸. This is true of most traditional societies, but it was specially true of Judaism, where table fellowship was always a religious affirmation of belonging. A Jewish meal was normally preceded by a blessing, in which the host blessed, broke and shared a loaf of bread, to show that all those taking part in the meal shared in the blessing which had been pronounced over the unbroken bread. Table fellowship in Judaism meant, as Joachim Jeremias puts it, "fellowship before God"⁹.

b) The meal as a pattern for community

But table fellowship in Judaism had other connotations as well. The communion it created had come to symbolize the shape

7 G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Miracles as the Subversion of a Power Structure?" in S. Kappen (ed.), *Jesus Today* (Madras: AICUF, 1985) 21-29.

8 Jeremias (n. 6 above) 115.

9 Ibid.

and destiny of Israel itself. Fully liberated Israel, the end time community, is therefore pictured in both the First and the Second Testaments, as a group of people enjoying table fellowship with God himself, by partaking in the eschatological banquet God has prepared for them (Isa 25:6; Mt 8:1; Lk 22:30). This end time community, it was believed, could be anticipated, made present here and now, in properly eaten festive meals. In the social world of Jesus, a meal had become (for some groups of Jews at least) "a microcosm of Israel's intended historic structure as well as a model of Israel's destiny".¹⁰

c) The Pharisaic model: Communities of the 'Holy'

This was certainly true of the Essenes of Qumran, who paid great attention to the arrangement of their meals, modelling them on what they believed would be the form of the messianic banquet (IQS 6:2-5);¹¹ and it was also, indeed very specially, true of the Pharisees. These 'separated ones' (*perishayya*) were associations of pious laymen who lived a life of strict observance, adhering scrupulously to the rules of tithing, and maintaining always the ritual purity required of priests actually serving in the Temple¹². By 70 C. E. and possibly even earlier, the Pharisees had become, Jacob Neusner suggests, 'primarily a society for table fellowship'¹³. Table fellowship, was "the high point of their life as a group"¹⁴, because their specific understanding of Israel's shape and destiny was expressed in the meals they ate together. These meals (not special meals, but their normal everyday meals) were always eaten with a great concern for ritual purity. "Members of a Pharisaic fellowship", writes Borg, "were committed to the tithing of all food and to eating every meal in that degree of purity observed by officiating priests in the Temple"¹⁵. In this way the Pharisaic associations (*chaburim*) used their meals to represent and prefigure the true Israel, which they believed was called to be a ritually pure community, "a kingdom of priests" (Ex 19:6).

10 Borg (n. 1 above) 80.

11 Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 3rd ed., 1987) 56-6; 51-52

12 Jeremiah (n. 6 above) 144

13 Jacob Neusner, "Three Pictures of the Pharisees: A Reprise", in his *Formative Judaism: Religious, Historical, and Literary Studies, Fifth Series* (Brown Judaic Studies 91) (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985) 51-77 (sp. 76.)

14 *ibid.*, 76

15 Borg (n. 1 above) 80-91

The preoccupation of the Pharisees to observe strict ritual purity meant that their table fellowship was restricted to those who were ritually pure according to their own exacting Pharisaic standards. Only those were welcome to their tables who paid their tithes faithfully (Lk 18:12; Mt 23:23), and who scrupulously observed the rules of ritual purity incumbent on officiating priests, by avoiding contact with polluted people and things, and by always washing their hands before meals (Mk 7:1-4; Mt 23:25f). Tax collectors (*telônai*) who, because of their ongoing association with Gentiles, were (like the 'untouchables' in India today) judged to be in a permanent state of pollution; and notorious sinners (*hamartoloi*) those "who lived a flagrantly immoral life... or who followed a dishonourable vocation or one which inclined them strongly to dishonesty"¹⁶, could obviously have no place at the tables of these exclusive groups of the ritually pure.

Such exclusiveness was obviously not a matter of social snobbery but of religious zeal. Like the Essenes of Qumran the Pharisees too took seriously the basic thrust of the post-exilic priestly code, neatly summed up in the command of Yhwh in Lev 20:26: "You are to be holy to me, because I the Lord, am holy and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own". Holiness here is not to be understood merely as moral probity, but as integration into the 'realm' of the divine, and therefore separation from the 'profane' world. Post exilic Judaism, in imminent danger of being swamped by the dominant cultures of the imperial powers to which they were subject (Persia, Greece, Rome), adopted as a strategy of survival the policy of closing in upon itself and building defensive walls (purity lines) to separate itself from dangerous gentile influences. For the Essenes at Qumran the separation was complete.

16 Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, art. "*hamartôlos*", in *TDNT* 1, 327. See Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1969) 303-312, for a list of the 'despised trades' whose practitioners were not only looked down upon by the people, but in the case of those listed in *b. Sanh.* 25b 9 (among them tax collectors and publicans) were officially ostracized, "deprived of civil and political rights to which every Israelite had a claim, even those such as bastards who were of seriously blemished descent". As Jeremias remarks "this makes us realize the enormity of Jesus' act in calling a publican to be one of his intimate disciples (Matt. 9 9 par; 21:3), and announcing the Good News to publicans and sinners by sitting down to eat with them" (pp. 311-312).

They kept themselves away from everything that could defile them by forming an isolated commune in the uninhabited 'wilderness'. For the Pharisees it was partial. They continued to live in the unclean world of a Roman colony, but tried to keep themselves uncontaminated by it, and in a state of permanent priestly purity, by avoiding contact with polluted persons or things, and by faithfully performing the requisite purifying rituals when such contact had taken place. For both the Pharisees and the Essenes holiness was identified with separation. This has been well described by Asher Finkel in his comparative study of the teaching of Jesus and the Pharisees:

In the Pharisaic schools "holiness", the key-word of the Priestly Codes is identified with the word "separation": separation from the heathens and foreigners in order to preserve the identity of the Jewish people; separation or classification among its own members, segregating the priests and the strict observers of the Code from the non-observers, the boorish and the common folk (the so called '*am ha-aretz*'). Also among the Essene societies created by the Teacher of Righteousness — as the Qumran writings suggest — to achieve a status of holiness the community must stress the rules of separation and purity as prescribed in the "order of the Brotherhood" (*Serekh Hayyachad*). The words of Rabbi Pinhas ben Jair, a known Jewish saint of the early part of the Third century A. D., review the important steps to be taken by the individual or the society in order to achieve a status of holiness or piety. He enumerates the steps as follows: heedfulness leads to diligence, diligence to cleanliness, cleanliness to separation and separation to holiness...¹⁷

3. The meaning of the table fellowship of Jesus

Against the background of these exclusive meals, of the Pharisaic associations (*chaburim*) or the Essene community (*hayyachad*) at which 'members only', that is, only those who satisfied the rigorous conditions for membership in the group, were welcome, the table fellowship of Jesus with 'tax collectors

17 Asher Finkel, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth: A Study of their Background, the Halachic and Midrashic Teaching, the Similarities and Differences* (Leiden: Brill, 1964) 43.

and sinners', the religious and social outcasts of his time, stands out as a powerful challenge. It challenges the Pharisaic and the Essene ideal of Israel as a holy community, whose holiness is to be maintained by preserving a state of complete separation from all that is ritually unclean. It implies instead a radically new understanding of holiness, of community and of God.

a) A new understanding of Holiness

This new understanding is revealed in a Q saying of Jesus (Mt 5:48=Lk 6:36) which refers to a well-known text from the First Testament. The saying, in its probably more original Lukan form, urges us to "be *merciful* just as your Father is *merciful*" (Lk 6:36). This clearly echoes the key command of the holiness code of Leviticus: "Be *holy* because I, Yhwh your God am *holy*" (Lev 19:2). But there is a significant difference. The "Yhwh your God" of Leviticus, becomes "Father" (*Abba*) in Luke; and so the point of reference shifts from God's "holiness" in Leviticus to God's "mercy" in Luke. Mercy, or inter-human compassion, rather than holiness in the sense of 'otherness' or 'separation' is now the content of our *imitatio Dei*, so that the 'mercy code' of Q (Lk 6:27-36) replaces the 'holiness code' of Leviticus (Lev 17-26) as the norm of religious behaviour¹⁸. True holiness is no longer defined by a 'separation' from the world which would reflect the 'otherness' of God; but by the 'mercy' which imitates God's utterly unconditional love. Religion is no longer a matter of ritual purity or cultic competence but of interhuman compassion.

b) A new model of community

This implied for Jesus a profound change in his understanding of the structure and destiny of his people. The change is expressed in his forceful rejection of the purity rules, which, as we have seen, had largely determined the ethos of Judaism since the Exile. Because of their belief that holiness meant separation, a conviction accentuated by their threatened situation as a colonized people, Jewish theology after the exile elaborated an intricate system of purity lines to define the boundaries which separated persons, places and things considered 'sacred' or 'clean', that is fit for use in the cult, from those regarded as 'profane', polluted',

18 Borg (n. 1 above) 127.

or 'unclean', and so unfit for cultic use. Very generally, one might say that people, places and things were defined as holy or unholy according to their relation to the Temple, the purity of their blood-lines, their bodily wholeness, and their congruence with the primal order imposed on the world (according to the priestly creation story) at its creation¹⁹. Thus:

1) Places were holy in terms of their closeness to the temple. Because the Temple was the 'holy place' and its inner sanctuary the 'very holy place' ('holy of holies'), Palestine was the 'holy land', and the surrounding Gentile world unholy, profane, demon-ridden territory. A list in the Mishnah elaborates on this, giving us ten degrees of holiness:

There are ten degrees of holiness.

The Land of Israel is holier than any other land.

The walled cities of the Land of Israel are still more holy in that they must send forth lepers from their midst...

Within the wall (of Jerusalem) is still more holy, for there only they may eat the Lesser Holy Things and the Second Tithe.

The Temple Mount is still more holy, for no man or woman that has flux, no menstruant, and no woman after childbirth may enter therein.

The Rampart is still more holy, for no gentiles and none that have contracted uncleanness from a corpse may enter therein...

The Court of Women is still more holy for none that had immersed himself the same day because of uncleanness may enter therein...

The Court of the Israelites is still more holy, for none whose atonement is incomplete may enter therein...

The Court of Priests is still more holy, for Israelites may not enter therein save only when they must perform the laying on of hands, slaughtering and waving.

Between the Porch and the altar is still more holy, for none that has a blemish or whose hair is unloosed may enter there.

The Sanctuary is still more holy, for none may enter there with hands and feet unwashed.

19 Cf. Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from cultural Anthropology* (London: SCM, 1981) 122-52; Jerome Neyrey, "Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel, *Semeia* 35 (1985) 91-128.

The Holy of Holies is still more holy, for none may enter therein save only the High Priest on the Day of Atonement at the time of the service. (m. *Kelim* 1:6-9).²⁰

2) This grading of places already implies a grading of the persons associated with them. The Holy of Holies accessible only to the High Priest is holier than the Sanctuary accessible to priests. The court of the priests is holier than the court of Israelites, which in turn is holier than the court of women. The land of Palestine inhabited by the Jews is holier than other lands inhabited by Gentiles. According to their standing with reference to the Temple we can therefore deduce a hierarchy of persons, descending from High Priest, to priest, to levite, to lay male Israelite, to Israelite woman, to Gentile. But several other factors also determined the purity rating of people, notably, the purity of their family lines, their bodily wholeness, and the nature of the occupation they were engaged in. Jews of dubious ancestry (such as bastards, orphans or foundlings), those suffering from physical impairment (eunuchs, lepers, menstruating women, the mutilated or the maimed), and those engaged in polluting trades (Gamblers, money-lenders, herdsmen, tax-collectors) incurred impurity and were judged 'unclean' (unfit for cult) in various degrees²¹. The Tosefta, an early (3rd century) supplement to the Mishnah gives a list of people in Israel ranked according to its purity laws. The list is by no means exhaustive but it offers a good illustration of how the various factors making for purity/pollution were combined to produce ranking. It grades the people in Israel as:

Priests—Levites—Israelites—Converts—Freed Slaves—
Disqualified Priests (=illegitimate children of Priests)—Temple
slaves—Bastards—Eunuchs—those with damaged genital
organs. (t. *Meg.* 2:7).²²

So an elaborate system of purity/pollution structured Jewish society at the time of Jesus, analogous to the caste system in India, which is also a system of purity/pollution but based on criteria which are totally different from those which determined the

20 Quoted from Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933) 606-606.

21 Jeremias (n. 16 above) 271-344.

22 Adapted from Neyrey (n. 19 above) 95-96.

ordering of first century Judaism²³. For the Pharisees and the Essenes this system of purities was constitutive of Israel as God's 'holy people'. They therefore sought to implement it as perfectly, as possible, believing that Israel's future lay in its attainment of perfect 'purity'. For Jesus however these purity regulations were a deviation to be removed; because for him, 'holiness' meant not 'separation' but 'mercy'. Jesus therefore rejected the whole system of purities with its distinctions of clean and unclean foods, holy and unholy places, pure and polluted people. This rejection which he demonstrates in his table fellowship with the polluted tax collectors and sinners, his touching of lepers (Mk 1:41), his unconcern about eating with unwashed hands (Mk 7:2), or being touched by an 'unclean' woman (Mk 5:25-34), was justified by him in a strikingly radical saying which totally rejects the purity regulations of Judaism. "There is nothing outside a person which by going into him or her can make him or her unclean", says Jesus, explaining why he does not object to his disciples eating with unwashed hands, "but the things which come out of a person make him or her unclean" (Mk 7:15).

This emphatic, antithetically formulated saying, so typical of Jesus, does not refer only to the dietary regulations of Judaism (as Mark seems to suggest, when he interprets it to mean that "Jesus declared all foods clean" [Mk 7:19; cf. Rom. 14:14]); but to the whole system of purities by means of which post-exilic Judaism attempted to distinguish the sacred from the profane. Indeed it invalidates all systems of purity (including caste) that derive purity/pollution from any external factor whatever. Nothing from the outside (no place, no person, no thing) can pollute a person; for nothing is in itself unclean. There are no polluting persons, places or things. The only source of pollution is the uncompassionate heart which generates 'evil thoughts', that is, harmful intentions which lead to injurious action. It is not the tax collectors and sinners (the dalits), with whom Jesus associates, who are 'polluted' but precisely the Pharisees (the so called 'clean castes') who treat them with contempt²⁴.

23 Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Delhi: OUP: 1988) 46-61.

24 Such a radical reversal of judgment is brought out with particular clarity in the story of the Pharisee and the Sinner in Lk 7:36-50. The point of the story is that the woman who has been labelled a "sinner" by Simon the

Jesus thus radically re-draws the purity lines of his social world. This redrawing abolishes the traditional distinctions between the sacred and the profane. There are now no intrinsically sacred places, persons, or things. All places and things are in themselves neutral (neither sacred nor profane); and every human person is in itself sacred because the human person as such, in its unadorned humanity, images the glory of God (Gen 1:27) and re-presents the person of Jesus himself (Mt 25:31-46). Aware that God is so with us, that the normal locus of our encounter with God is humankind,²⁵ the community that Jesus envisages will worship God neither in Jerusalem nor in Gerizim but in spirit and in truth, that is, wherever a human community comes together in sincerity and love (Jn 4:23). It will acknowledge no 'father' except the 'Father in heaven', no priest or teacher except the Christ (Mt 23: 8-10), and admit no hierarchy of status (for all are brothers and sisters) but only a hierarchy of service and of love (Mk 10:42:45). It is unconcerned about Pharisaic purity rituals, like the washing of hands before meals, because it locates purity/pollution not in external factors but in the disposition of the heart (Mk 7:1-23), and measures holiness not in terms of separation but in terms of compassion. For it knows that it is by loving our brothers and our sisters that we 'love God' (Mt 22:34-40)²⁶, and so enter into the 'holy' realm of the divine.

c) A new experience of God

Such a radical redrawing of the map of his social world is possible to Jesus, because he can draw on a radically new experience of God. God is not experienced by him primarily as 'holy' (the source of numinous power, the 'wholly other'), sharply separated from the 'profane' world, and demanding that his people become a 'holy' people, separated from other peoples by sharply

Pharisee (v. 39) is, as her love for Jesus shows, a forgiven sinner. It is Simon who in striking contrast to the woman has shown no love at all (v. 44-46), who reveals himself as an unforgiven sinner -- that is as one who has failed to experience the forgiving love of God. It is obvious that nothing has been forgiven him, because he has shown no love at all!

25 George Soares-Prabhu, "The Sacred in the Secular: Reflections on a Johannine Sutra, The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John. 1, 14)", *Jeevadhara* XVII/98 (1987) 125-40 (sp. 133-36.)

26 George Soares-Prabhu, "The Synoptic Love-Commandment: The Dimensions of Love in the Teaching of Jesus", *Jeevadhara* XIII/74 (1983) 85-103 (sp.88-91)

defined purity lines, such as those elaborated in post-exilic Judaism. Rather Jesus experiences God as 'merciful', a God who reaches out in forgiveness and love to all people, across all the lines of separation that we like to draw (Jew/Gentile, righteous/sinner, clean caste/dalit), and who summons his people to a similar compassion, that is, to an effective love that will reach out beyond the bonds of kinship, clan and race to the outsider, the undeserving, the enemy (Lk 6:32-36).

It is this all encompassing compassion of God that the table fellowship of Jesus reveals. His 'communion' with tax collectors and sinners is an acted parable, through which he brings home to listeners his experience of God as 'abba' the loving parent, and the 'good news' of liberation (God's Rule) that this experience grounds. Like his healings and exorcisms, the table fellowship of Jesus with tax collectors and sinners becomes a strikingly effective enactment of the coming of God's Rule, that is, of the end-time salvation, whose imminent coming Jesus, on the basis of his God-experience, forcefully proclaims. Such salvation, Jesus believes, will be brought about not (as the Essenes hoped) through armed conflict in which the 'children of darkness' will be decisively overcome by the 'children of light'; nor (as the apocalyptists, many Pharisees among them, believed) by a cosmic catastrophe effected by God, which will bring to an end 'this evil age' and usher in 'the age to come' — but by the free gift of God's loving forgiveness, reaching out unconditionally to all those who "repent", that is, who turn trustingly to God and accept his love²⁷. The table fellowship of Jesus with tax collectors and sinners, is therefore (like his miracles) a 'sign', which translates his verbal announcement of God's Rule, the central message of his preaching (Mk 1:14-15), into visible action. His conduct thus becomes, as Ernst Fuchs has said, "the real framework of his proclamation"²⁸. Or as Joachim Jeremias sums it up:

27 George Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society", in D. S. Amalorpavadass (ed.), *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society* (Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1981) 579-608. I have suggested here that the central message of Jesus "The Kingdom of God has come/repent" (Mk 1:15), ought to be paraphrased "God loves you/accept his love" — cf. pp. 597-600.

28 Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1964) 21.

Jesus' meals with the publicans and sinners, too, are not only events on a social level, not only an expression of his unusual humanity and social generosity and his sympathy with those who were despised, but had an even deeper significance. They are an expression of the mission and message of Jesus (Mark 2:17), eschatological meals, anticipatory celebration of the feast in the end time (Matt. 8:11 par.), in which the community of saints is already being represented (Mark 2:19). *The inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, achieved in table-fellowship, is the most meaningful expression of the message of the redeeming love of God*²⁹.

Through his table fellowship with the social and religious outcasts Jesus thus demonstrates in a most convincing way that God's love is not conditional, not restricted to the religious elite who would like to monopolize it, but reaches out without exception to all. There are no outcasts for God.

B. The Table Fellowship of Jesus and the Christian Dalits

What is at stake in the table fellowship of Jesus with tax collectors and sinners is, therefore, the heart of the Christian message itself. Over and against the experience of God as 'wholly other' and the image of community as 'separated' which the exclusive meals of the Pharisaic *chaburim* present, Jesus, through his meals with the religious and social outcasts of his day, presents a new experience of God and a new understanding of community, in which there can be no 'outcasts' — for God is experienced as a loving Parent, and every fellow Christian as a brother or a sister. To attempt, then, to maintain purity systems like caste, which refuse to accept sections of the community as brothers and sisters because they are considered 'outcasts', is, plainly, to do violence to the basic message of Jesus. Caste discrimination in any form whatever is wholly incompatible with Christianity. It is frightening, then, to read in a recent study of two villages in India, that:

More than two centuries of Catholic faith among the Reddy's of these two villages have not been able to make any dent in their rigid attitude towards the caste system. By and large

29. Jeremias (n. 6. above) 115-116

they are well integrated with Hindu Reddys and other Hindu communities in their villages. They have achieved this by keeping their caste systems intact and not integrating themselves with other Catholic communities including other Reddy Catholic subgroups. The Madigas, who became Catholics, could not improve their status. The Reddy Catholics are also against them and resent their conversions³⁰.

What, one may wonder, is really Christian about these villages, where Christians, in their basic attitudes to people, remain exactly like the Hindus around them? Have they been 'converted' at all? Or have they merely been 'baptized' by earnest missionaries who compass land and sea for caste converts — as if it made any difference to Jesus to what caste those he calls belong?³¹ Can one speak here of a change of heart — or has there been just a change of label? Is such a change of label, without a change of heart enough to make one a Christian? Can one claim to be a Christian without accepting at least in principle, the basic Christian ethos? Is it possible to proclaim Jesus as Lord and refuse to share his experience of a God who admits no outcasts, or his understanding of a community in which all are brothers and sisters (and therefore of one caste), because they are children of the one Parent in heaven? Is it all right to say "Lord, Lord" and not "do the will of the Father who is in heaven" (Mt 7:21)?

30 G. Prakash Reddy, "Caste and Christianity: A Study of Shudra Caste Converts in Rural Andhra Pradesh", in *Religion and Society in South India (A Volume in Honour of Prof. N. Subba Reddy)*, ed. V. Sudarsen, G. Prakash Reddy and M. Suryanarayana (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corp., (1987) 113–28 (sp. 23).

31 Note the comment of Reddy in the article just cited (n. 30 above). "Some of the Catholic missionaries even disliked the conversion of untouchable castes and spoke openly against it. In this connection the comments of Fr. Clement Bonnard, who was very popular among Telegu Christians around 1820, is (sic) revealing. He says that 'it is very difficult to convert the Pariahs, it is a waste of time to preach to them since much greater good can be done among the Sudras.'...The same attitude was evinced by them (the Catholic missionaries) to the recruitment of native clergy. Till 1950 there was an unwritten convention in the Catholic Church of India that except under extraordinary circumstances no untouchable Catholic should be admitted to priesthood. This convention was followed firstly to avoid displeasing the higher caste Christians, and secondly it was felt that an untouchable clergy would be at a disadvantage to deal with upper caste Christians" (119). How far such an 'unwritten convention' was in fact operative needs of course, to be studied.

The answers to these questions are surely obvious, and yet we know that the two villages spoken of above are by no means atypical in Christian India. In one form or the other caste, even in its most virulent form of 'untouchability' is rife in the Christian (and specially Roman Catholic) communities, particularly in the long standing churches of South India where one might have expected a centuries old tradition of Christianity to have generated a stronger Christian sensibility. Surely there can be no clearer indication of the massive failure of Christian teaching in India (and specifically of the immense and costly system of education it has built up) than the fact that large sections of the Indian church can still assume condescending caste attitudes, without even being conscious of the fact that they are guilty of serious sin.

When caste discrimination enters into the celebration of the Eucharist the sin becomes sacrilege. The Eucharist has always carried the memory of Jesus' meals with tax collectors and sinners. Perhaps even more than the last supper of Jesus, what inspired the early Christian fellowship meals which developed into the Eucharistic celebrations that we have today, was the memory of the meals that Jesus ate with his outcast disciples³². Indeed the Last Supper itself was the last of such meals³³, bringing the faith in Jesus that inspired them, the hope they engendered as anticipations of the messianic banquet, and the loving fellowship they exorcised, to their fullness. The eucharistic memorial of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is also the celebration of the community which that life, death and resurrection creates. To celebrate the Eucharist while breaking up its participants into caste groups, and to treat fellow members of the one eucharistic community (the true 'body of Christ') as outcasts, by consigning them to special parts of the church or to separate places in a communion queue, is therefore to parody the Eucharist. It is to turn the joyous, hope-filled, liberating meals of Jesus into caste meals, or the self-righteous celebrations of the Pharisaic *chaburim*. What can it mean to speak of the 'real presence' of Jesus in a situation where he is being openly humiliated in his brothers and sisters, and where the community that he founded by laying

32. Perrin (n. 5 above) 104-105.

33. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1966) 204-205.

down his life as a ransom for all, is being fragmented and mocked? How is it that we who would be 'scandalized' to see a priest celebrating mass without an alb, can comfortably tolerate or even take part in utterly scandalous Eucharists like these?

Paul's response to analogous situations is instructive. When Peter refused table fellowship with Gentile Christians in Antioch, out of respect for the Jewish 'caste system' (which was not even remotely as discriminating or as damaging as ours), Paul "opposed him to his face" (Gal 1:11-16). What disturbed Paul was, of course, not so much the discrimination Peter practised against the Gentile Christians (though this too would have figured in his reaction), as his concern that a return to the Law with its elaborate purity rules might dilute faith in Jesus, and weaken the conviction that salvation does not come by observing the law, but by trusting in God's forgiving love revealed to us in Christ (Gal 1:15). But allowing for Paul's particular concern, one could interpret this early Christian dispute about table fellowship as a mirror image of the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees accuse Jesus of eating with tax collectors and sinners (Jews become "as Gentiles"),²⁴ Paul accuses Peter (become a Pharisee in his devotion to the Law) for not doing so! Basically the issue of table fellowship for Paul and for Jesus is the same, that is, both see it as the affirmation of a community in which belonging is assured not by 'righteousness' (or caste), that is, not by 'works' (performed in this life or in a past one), but by grace. At stake is the basic value around which one structures one's world: is it 'cleanness' or is it 'love'.

This becomes clear when one comes to a properly eucharistic reference in Paul. His anger at the eucharistic abuses occurring in the community at Corinth is undisguised: "When you come together it is not the Lord's supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else; and one remains hungry while another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the Church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (1Cor 11:20f).

But what has happened in Corinth is surely no worse than what is happening in many churches in India today. There in

Corinth the eucharistic community was divided by class divisions, so that the rich and the poor coming together to affirm their oneness in Christ were kept apart by the different kinds of food they ate, or the different times or places in which they ate it³⁵. But such class divisions are far less damaging than the caste divisions we have brought into our eucharistic communities. For these we know do immense psychic and spiritual harm, comparable only to the harm done by racism³⁶. For what caste, like racism, does is to question the humanity of the dalit or the black, deny them human dignity, and by repeatedly affirming their inferiority, deprive them of their self-worth. Nothing can be more sinful than this. That is why I believe that the homologous systems of untouchability and apartheid (the institutional high points of the caste and of white racism) are the two most evil structures that exist in the world today. To bring either of these into the celebration of the Eucharist is surely to "despise the Church of God and humiliate those who have nothing" (1 Cor 11:22), and so "sin against the body and the blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27).

The existence of Christian dalits with their inbuilt situation of inferiority (poignantly described by Antony Raj in the first article of this issue) is a reminder to us of how deeply we have sinned. More, their existence makes us aware of the absurdity of our situation. For, properly speaking, the very expression 'Christian dalit' is (like 'square circle') a contradiction in terms. The brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind as Adolf Harnack correctly perceived is of the 'essence of Christianity', even if it does

35. The exact problem at Corinth is not easy to define from Paul's elliptical allusions to it. It has been suggested that divisions arose from one or more of three causes: 1) rich and poor ate at separate times, since the rich could begin their meal before the poor, who could come only after work; 2) the rich and poor ate in separate places: the rich the private room of the house, the poor in the outside atrium; 3) the rich and poor ate different kinds of food — cf. Gerd Theissen, "Social Integration and Sacramental Activity: 'An Analysis of 1 Cor 11:17-34', in his *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 145-174

36. The psychological damage inflicted by caste has to my knowledge not been extensively studied. That inflicted by racism has. For a classic study see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1971); and *ibid.*, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967);

not exhaust that essence³⁷. For the 'God of our Lord Jesus Christ' recognizes no one as outcast; and Jesus welcomes 'tax collectors and sinners' to his table, and identifies himself with the least of his brothers and sisters, to model for us a community in which there are no 'pure' or 'polluted', no 'great' or 'small', because every one belongs to 'the family of God' (Mk 3:31-35). There can be no 'dalit' in a Christian community, for "in Christ" there is neither Jew nor Greek; neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, neither clean caste nor dalit — for all of us have 'put on Christ' (Gal 3:28). The fact that Christian dalits do exist (and suffer) among us is a sign of how little Christian we are, and of how much we stand in a state of serious and, one suspects, unrepentant sin. Evangelization 2000 could well begin at home!

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37 More accurately Harnack speaks of the Fatherhood of God and of our being children of God (and so of "the infinite value of the human soul") as basic elements of the message of Jesus — cf. Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (Gloucester, Mass: Peter smith, 1978) 83.

Book Reviews

Liberative Struggles in a Violent Society (Forum Series - I), John Vattamattom et al. (eds). Hyderabad, 1991, (pp. xx + 246), Rs.50.

The book under review is divided into two parts. The first part presents the proceedings of the workshop on the "Dynamics of the liberative struggles of the poor and the oppressed"), conducted under the auspices of FORUM from 17 to 21 August 1991 in Hyderabad. The second part is a documentation of the statements of the first two national conventions of FORUM (1987, 1989), final reflections of the two Asia-Oceania FORUM meetings (1986, 1988) and the two statements of CRI (1986, 1988). The short introduction gives the *raison d'être* of the FORUM convention and the publication of the present volume. FORUM is an association of Religious Social Activists who are partners in the struggles of the poor and the oppressed in the country. The professed goal of this group is to struggle for a humanised world, where women, dalits and the tribals will have their human dignity restored. Though the various groups differ in their ideologies and strategies, they agree on the goal to be pursued, and there is a growing awareness that sharing of experiences, theoretical clarifications and mutual support and common endeavours are necessary for the transformation of an alienated humanity to a reconciled community. The present book is an attempt in this direction.

From among the numerous areas of the liberative struggles in India, the book focuses on four main issues, viz. pauperization of the fisherfolk, discrimination of dalits in the Church, emancipation of women, and justice in the field of medicine and health-care.

The whole purpose of the workshop and the publication of the findings may be summed up as follows: "A new theology, spirituality and church structure must emerge from the articulated experiences, aspirations and values of the people in struggle" (p. 88). Introducing the theme of the workshop, Fr. T. K. John identifies the participants as partners in the liberative struggles of the

poor and the exploited. He poses a number of challenging questions that are truly provocative to wake up the Church from its cosy slumber and selfish introversion. What is the relevance of the many values, customs and institutions? What is knowledge if it does not become liberative? What is culture if that does not lead to humanisation of all? What is science and progress if it does not contribute to the liberation of the enslaved? What is religion and spirituality if these do not find their identity in their relatedness to the problems of the oppressed? What are temples, churches, mosques and gurudwaras if the broken and the wounded, the marginalized and the outcasts are not their main concerns? What vital links exist between the many sacraments and the christian praxis? What is the social empirical content of the many celebrations in the Church? What are the implications of the vows, esp. poverty, of the religious?

The first case-study (by Sr. Philomine Mary) of the struggle of the fisherfolk in Kerala gives a succinct account of the heroic campaign of this long-exploited group, under the leadership of catholic clergy and religious. It also mentions the intimidations by the unholy alliance between the political and ecclesiastical leadership to put down the legitimate campaign of the marginalized and those who acted in solidarity with them. The article also questions the priorities of the ecclesiastical leadership regarding ministry in the Church. In his response J. Samarakone illuminates the various issues involved in the struggles, especially 'violence', fast unto death' etc. He decries the callous stand taken by the KCBC against the advice of the CRI and the theologians, and above all, against the interests of the marginalized.

The second case-study (by Fr. Antony Raj) deals with the struggles of the dalit christians in Pondichery. The dalit christians who form 75% of the diocese are discriminated on the basis of caste in their own church. The author poses very serious challenges to the legitimacy of authority in the Church, that is insensitive to the cries of the poor and the exploited.

The third case-study (by Sr. Agnes) is on the Gudalur women's struggle for land and shelter. The response by Ramu K. Bhagal highlights the threefold oppression to which women are subjected: Caste-oppression, Class-oppression and Gender-oppression. The success story of the Gudalur women's struggle also points to the need of common action supported by men, fellow activists, lawyers etc.

The fourth case-study (by Wishvas Rane) deals with a long legal battle to ban the dangerous Eestrogen Progesterone drugs (EP Drugs) which cause serious physical disorders in the unborn

child. Although all the developed countries had either banned or withdrawn the drug from the market, the doctor - drug industry - government axis tried in every possible way to avert a ban or withdrawal-order, against the interests of the consumers. The response by K. R. Antony brings in more such cases and criticises the inefficiency and indifference of the Government in the health scene. He suggests the formation of consumer societies comprising advocates, journalists, social workers, senior citizens and medical workers. Only through their combined effort justice can be guaranteed to the helpless patients.

In the general discussions the need for critical collaboration with the state machinery was emphasised. Further, distinguishing rebellion from revolution the members resolved to be revolutionaries for the coming of the kingdom. The meeting also pledged to take up active non-violent resistance prompted by moral indignation at the unjust structures of the society and not fall into the easy passive non-violence amounting to resignation to evil.

The articles by Paul de la Guerivere and G. Harigopal clarify the cultural, social and philosophical aspects of people's struggle for justice. George Soares Prabhu, in his article "Spirituality of Jesus as a spirituality of solidarity and struggle" gives an excellent exposition of authentic christian spirituality. It is based on a new reading of the Bible and the person of Jesus in the context of real life. Cross, he says, is not an arbitrary irruption into the life of Jesus. It is the natural outcome of his spirituality of identification with the poor and of confrontation with the rich and the powerful. But it is not a sign of death but of life, guaranteed by the resurrection. George Lobo, in his article "Church's teaching on Violence", gives a detailed account of the magisterial teaching on violence down the centuries. He elucidates the arguments pro and contra of the use of force and establishes the rationality of peaceful means for radical change. Those who resort to violence to correct an urgent situation will have to demonstrate that it is more efficacious in the short and long run. They would have to weigh the consequences of unleashing violence, especially the suffering caused to the innocent victims of present injustice.

The central principle basic to this book, as well as the workshop, is to focus on the human situations of struggle for justice before we respond to it. The new hermeneutics implies commitment - action - reflection - action. It is the Word of God that illumines the whole process and reinstates the commitment. The present book, we would say, is a useful handbook for social activists and a necessary source-book for the theologians.

Die orthodoxe Theologie der Gegenwart. Eine Einführung. Karl Christian Følmy, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990. XXIV-262 pp. (with eight icons).

The book under review is an introduction to oriental theology such as has been developed by Greek and Russian Orthodox theologians, and a short account of it will certainly be in place, since it would otherwise go unnoticed by theologians in India.

Theology is best defined as explicitation of Christian experience, i. e., the believer's experience of Christ's death and resurrection. Now experience is something that belongs to the sphere of prereflective *cogito* or the *irréflecti*, and the work of translating it into the categories of thought the mind has at its disposal and expressing it in words is what we call explicitation. This is essentially an interpretative or hermeneutic activity, which is concretely realized through the manipulation of language. It is therefore something linguistic, a speech – or language-event, as experts call it, and it brings out the virtualities or potentialities contained in the believer's experience.

One of the general tendencies of the human mind is to create systems, in which can be recapitulated all the disparate and disconnected, and also apparently unrelated items in a particular field of knowledge, and thus produce a synthesis in which everything has its place. It is well known that all the fields of knowledge have now-a-days evolved into systems, and there is no wonder that Christian theology has developed into a system: systematic theology (also called dogmatics, dogmatic theology, church dogmatics etc.) is a highly technical and thoroughly specialized discipline.

The ultimate basis of speculative or systematic theology must be clearly grasped. The believer spontaneously reflects on the experience he had of Christ's death and resurrection, in other words, on God's self-disclosure through Christ's death and resurrection, and this activity of his assumes concrete form and shape through action and thought. Action becomes crystallized as the full living of the Christian faith, in other words, Christian praxis or orthopraxis; thought in its highest development is speculative theology, and cult or worship too belongs to the element of action. All three — praxis, worship, and theologizing — belong together, and constitute the normal expression of Christian experience.

Systematization is unthinkable apart from some philosophy or other, and philosophy has itself been something created exclusively by the Indo-European peoples, specifically by the Greeks and the Indians. The metaphysics of Aristotle is the basis of St. Thomas Aquinas' theology, whereas that of Plato served as the foundation of St. Augustine's thought, and the Augustinian tradition was continued by St. Bonaventure and Calvin; the thought of Plato has been closely followed by the Orthodox theologians as well.

An interesting fact in the history of the working of the human mind is that the Semito-Hamitic groups (i. e., the Israelite Jews, the Arabs, the Syrians, the Copts and the Ethiopians) and the Armenians (who are Indo-Europeans) never created a comprehensive system of thought, which is the same thing as saying that they never produced a full-fledged systematic theology. Orientals at times say that their theology is liturgical theology. This only goes to show that an important element in the Christian faith has remained undeveloped: the liturgical books of the eastern and western churches have, for example, nothing to contribute to the problem of hermeneutics, the question of creation and evolution, grace and freewill etc. Though it will certainly contribute to the growth of piety, liturgical theology is not the whole of theology, and it can never serve as a substitute for speculative/systematic theology.

With regard to the theology of the Syrian churches, preserved chiefly in the liturgical books, the Protestant scholar R. Boyd, in *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras, 1969) p. 9, notes that it "has remained entirely Syrian, based on the Syriac language, and theologically as far from Indian thought as is Roman or Protestant theology".

We would like to mention here two manuals of Orthodox theology which are quite comprehensive: 1) P. N. Trembelas, *Dogmatique de l'Eglise Orthodoxe Catholique*. 3 vols., Bruges, 1966. The work was originally published in Greek (Athens, 1959-1961) and has been translated by Pierre Dumont OSB; the French edition carries a letter of appreciation from Cardinal Bea. It is important to note that the author is a layman. 2) D. Staniloe, *Orthodoxe Dogmatik*, I-II. Einsiedeln-Köln-Gütersloh, 1985ff. This is a translation from the Rumanian, and comprises three volumes. The present writer does not know whether the third

volume is already out or not. Both the manuals make fascinating reading.

Felmy's *Einführung* is a real work of scholarship, which includes in its bibliography monographs and articles not only in the West European languages but also in the East European ones (Russian, Greek etc.); there is a general bibliography (pp. XVII-XXIII) and special bibliography at the end of each section. The book has nine chapters, several of them with subdivisions; we add here the chapter-headings:

1. "We have seen the true light" — Theology of experience
2. "The seeing in not-seeing" — Apophatic theology
3. "Come, peoples, let us adore the triune Godhead" — The experience of God as Father, Son and Spirit
4. "... and in the one Lord Jesus Christ' the only-begotten Son" — Christology
5. "... and in the Holy Spirit, the lord and giver of life" — Pneumatology
6. "As God I shall be united with you, gods" — Redemption and divinization
7. "... we all who share the one bread and the one cup, united with each other in the communion of the Holy Spirit" — The experience of the Church in the Eucharist
8. The mysteries (sacraments) in the experience of the Church
9. "... and in the life of the world to come" — The eschatological orientation of Orthodox theology

It is hoped that this rough outline will give the reader some idea of the way in which Orthodox theologians go about theologizing. The captions within inverted commas are citations from various sources; e. g., no.2: "The seeing in not-seeing" (p. 25) is quoted from the *Life of Moses* by St. Gregory of Nyssa.

The Orthodox theologians regard western theology, both Catholic and Protestant, as something purely intellectualistic, without giving due importance to Christian experience as had through the ascetic and mystic life and through participation in the liturgy. This criticism is not fully justified, for western Christians, no matter to which confession they belong, also insist on the need to live the Christian life in all its plenitude before one starts theologizing.

Several details which form an integral part of the tradition of Orthodox theologizing, such as epiclesis, filioque, icon-theology, Hesychiasm, theosis, theotocology, and so on are succinctly but competently discussed. Felmy's work is a must for Latin scholars who are interested in oriental theology, and especially for oriental theologians in India (whose publications are unfortunately sub-standard and therefore most inappropriate to give non-Orientals a clear idea of the depth, richness and originality of the oriental heritage).

K. Luke

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